REVIEWS FROM READERS

"... a unique blend: novels with comparable character interactions are common, but they're fictional, and thus fantastical. Conversely, memoirs are never as personal ... perhaps that's why I found *She and I* so emotionally gripping." - Bernie Horowitz

"I really don't cry easily, but this had me weeping." - Lindsay Woodcox

"A glimpse into a relationship's heart." - Susan Hymas

"... quite unusual, and quite gripping ... juicy and full of emotional events as he pursues love where it takes him ... he does not aim to titillate; rather he means to inspire." - John J. Enright

"Tonight I finished - tears falling, drying then welling up again. I feel grateful." - Kathleen Glass

"Rich, breathtaking ... each scene a story unto itself. Love the texture." - Stefanie Harvey

"Powerfully written ... very poetic ... poignant ... an amazing accomplishment." - Carol Fiore

"I couldn't put it down. I sat in my chair all night and read it all. It's inspired me to start writing - to chronicle some of the really good stuff of my life." - Chris Crawford

SHE AND I

A Fugue

By the Author:

Tender Darkness: A Mary MacLane Anthology
- as publisher -

(forthcoming)
Human Days: The Complete Mary MacLane Anthology
- as publisher -

Author's Website:
http://www.fuguewriter.com

SHE AND I

A Fugue

by Michael R. Brown

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The author is grateful for the consent of Mira Graham and Gabrielle Martin - a requested pseudonym, each - to the telling of this story.

Written words quoted have been taken from records of the originals, in places lightly edited for continuity or orthography. All else is from the author's memory, and he takes full responsibility as such.

Introduction

This is the story of an experience - or, really, a line of experience - that began in my earliest days and came through to a development in the first months of 2001.

This book is an attempt to hear and give that experience's own voice, which is personal and impersonal - we all have both within us, and can neglect neither without detriment.

The manner of telling has been controlled by that end. What is of the classical is not in obedience to tradition, of the modernist not in defiance of tradition. On the contrary, in the course of writing a synthesis became necessary.

Michael R. Brown
Queenstown, New Zealand
6 July 2008

I. BIRTH, DEATH, BIRTH

1965-1978

Mephistopheles: The heathen-folk do not concern me.
They occupy a hell that's all their own.
But help there is.
Faust: Quick! Tell its history!
Meph.: Not glad do I reveal a loftier mystery -
Enthroned sublime in solitude are goddesses;
Around them is no place, a time still less;
To speak of them embarrasses.
They are the Mothers!
Faust: (terrified) Mothers!
Meph.: Do you fear?
Faust: The Mothers! Mothers! Strange the word I hear.

- Goethe, *Faust*, pt II, trans. George Madison Priest (1932)

1. Aloft

1965 - mid-1968.

My mother and I flew across the sea first; my father was to follow in a few weeks, after he'd closed affairs in England. Then our new life in California was to begin.

My mother's fare from London to San Francisco had been bought round-trip, originally. She'd wanted to bring me - three months old, first-born of the new generation - to California to see her parents, then return home, to England.

Her father'd been dying - in his middle-fifties, rheumatoid arthritis and pernicious anemia for almost twenty years - and in those days to surpass fifty transfusions was to place one's life on the knees of the gods. He'd survived eighty-one. When he'd gone to the hospital for his eighty-second, he'd told the nurses his first grandchild was coming and he wanted to be strong and healthy for him.

A little while after he'd come home, he'd begun having trouble breathing. My grandmother had climbed into bed with him, held him to her, and he'd lain there, helpless, body withered. He had looked into his wife's eyes and said softly, "Honey, I'm drowning." And then my grandfather - once horseman, sportsman, cocktails-and-Charleston intriguer of women, possessor of eloquence and physical beauty and perfect pitch and an easy way with the piano - had stopped breathing.

The transfusion had been too much for his poor suffering body. His heart could no longer keep his lungs clear of fluid, and so, on dry land, he'd drowned in the waters of his own flesh.

We never met.

Days before, my father - district sales manager for a British food concern - had lost his London job. He'd announced plans for American fortune, so a visit'd turned at last minute into a transcontinental family relocation. We were to live at my grandmother's house until he'd established himself.

He never came. He went to France, played golf in the Italian Open, careened about Europe, wrote strangely beautiful letters which spoke of

longing to be with us again.

Almost a year later, he telephoned my mother from Canada as if no time had passed. He asked for money for a plane ticket. She wired the money, and he came.

They separated, not long after.

One morning, shortly before the divorce, she had no child-care and couldn't afford to miss a day of work. He agreed to take me for the day. All I remember is the color-lettered floor-shifter of the car, and his dark-suited neutral presence to my left as we accelerated downhill, away from my grandmother's.

In the years to come, he'd flee contact. I'd trace him - in France, in England, through lawyers, through old business partners - but I never saw him again.

Summer 1968.

A fence of wood separated the backyards - her parents', my grandmother's.

We were, each of us, about three, and liked to look at one another through a little gap in the slats, and talk.

One day, I stood in the wind-blowing sunshine, waiting for her to arrive at a promised time.

I was happy, eager, almost weightless in my body.

Late 1968 - mid-1969.

There were men around my mother until I was four, then came the one. She'd told his name, softly - "Mister Vidouris" - he stood, tall, dark-suited, over me in my grandmother's fern-filled garden on his first visit, laying a wrist-watch on my palm.

I held it, focused my eyes on its face, but my fingers accidentally pressed the right mix of side-buttons, and the thin disk made a low buzz and vibrated in my hand. I'd a wordless sense he'd let me play with it so I'd like him.

I don't remember their faces. But if memory held males by mechanical implements, for females it took emotions.

The car is long since scrapped. The watch, I understand, is set aside and left to me in my stepfather's will.

But the feeling of the souls is as alive as it ever was.

Women were big presences.

They raised me.

July 1969 - 1972.

In California, I'd had playmates. At the apartment my mother'd moved to, her last single year, we'd made mud-pie cake, played hiding-games in hedges of the back common-gardens. But even as we'd played, they'd blended together.

My new stepfather, my mother, and I'd moved to a small New Jersey suburb of Manhattan - house with tall trees, big lawny yards, and next year a curly-haired ivory-skinned baby sister, and two friends from the neighborhood: Lisa and Allison - my first personal friends: the first whose selves I remember.

Lisa Johnson lived in the high-hedged, blinds-drawn grey house of Mrs Castelli. Mrs Castelli was seen each day, no matter the weather, picking leaves and papers from her yard and sweeping or snow-shoveling the walk. She stooped over her property in the very same pieces of clothing - tattered dark-blue raincoat, dark-blue kerchief over her hair, torn dark pants - no matter the season. She seemed, as she crossed the yard of her ranch house of glass and stone, neither happy nor unhappy, but singly, raggedly attentive to her task.

Lisa didn't always live in the house at the corner of Radburn and Harristown. Some family disturbance - Mrs Castelli was too old to be her mother - kept her moving between relatives. I don't know where she spent the most time, didn't wonder about the relations of Johnsons to Castellis, but when she was there she was my friend.

She spoke quietly, tentatively - she always got home on time. A 1970 photo shows a mustard-brown coat to keep her warm against autumn breezes, white button-up shirt beneath, a face of gentle mischief and recessive, elusive awakeness. She seemed to live in a murmur.

Allison Dimare lived mid-block, other side of Harristown. I knew nothing of her family. She seemed always out-burst from their house - her quickness outran them, her sharp and hectic light put them in shade. A freebooter, able navigator of the sidewalks, driveways, and backyards that are freeways of early youth, she hurled into a future she bore within herself.

She was my first business partner. One stifling burning-sun day we'd brewed strong pure lemonade and sold paper cups on the Harristown sidewalk fronting Mrs Castelli's. We'd done good business all afternoon - near evening two high-school-age toughs walked up, bought one each, then seized our pitcher and kept pouring cupfuls, far beyond what they'd paid. "One for the road!" they exclaimed repeatedly, grinning. We were shocked by these big boys stealing from us under the mask of good-fellowship, and we waited helplessly for them to drink their fill and leave. Allison swore at their backs, quietly and darkly.

Not many years later, she'd be known for being first to smoke, first to drink beer, a teacher of advanced cursing to kids several grades above. A 1970 photo, too, shows her dressed in bright-flowered smock and flare-legged pants of the time, face scrunched up, facing the camera head-on - disregarder of any way but her own.

The in-turned and the outward - the retirer and the advancer - the obedient and the defiant - the good girl of the neighborhood, and the bad.

❧

1971-1972.

My stepfather's sister was never going to marry, they said. No one was doing anything about it, so I'd decided I would. She'd smiled and said we'd wait until later.

Months later, my California grandmother - known as "Goosie" to all - nickname she'd made when I was born, so I'd have something easy to call her - had come visiting. They'd compared notes and found I'd pro-

posed the same solution to my grandmother's loneliness.

"The jig is up," my aunt said, holding back a smile. "We know everything," said Goosie.

"What's the problem?" I said, looking up at them, moving forearms outward. "You can't - propose to two ladies at once," said my aunt, looking at her cohort. "How did you think you were going to get away with it?" said Goosie.

"Simple," I said. "I'm going to marry you both!"

They both dissolved in laughter. My grandmother took me in her arms, held me tight, and whispered that if she could, she would.

Summer 1973.

Maria and I ran across the lawn, hand in hand, laughing in the sunshine. We had until ten, and her cousin at the front of the house had just called "Four!"

We saw at the same time, turned like birds, let go hands, bent down, scrambled in on knees, away from the leaf-filtered light. We turned, sat, pushed back until elbows hit the rear wall. We clapped hands over our mouths to hold in giggles.

Her cousin yelled "Ten!" and began to stalk. We listened to her stomping in the side-gardens, then the backyard itself, bellowing deep-voiced threats of carnage on discovery. The sounds were nearer, then further.

We pressed to the wall, looked out. We knew that if she looked in, we were finished.

Then, together, Maria and I looked at each other.

Our eyes met in the gloom. Her head was over me, brown hair in curlets over her cheek. I froze.

She leaned forward, canted her head to her right, and touched her soft lips to mine, not outside to outside but in-of-lip to in-of-lip. A wave of pleasure surged in me. She pulled away, quickly, smiled, and turned forward.

We said nothing, but the monster's eye could've shown in the opening and I'd not have cared. I was stunned. My body was warm, tingling - but

conflict came - a feeling of shame, as if I'd done something bad.

I remember nothing more of that summer day. I don't know if the cousin found us, or what other games we may have played. I'm sure I saw Maria again - we'd met in exercise, at YM/YWCA, where the kids sang out "Maria Maria Sangria" at her - she was tall for her age and, with some geographic confusion, Italian - and I do know our lips never touched again.

That night, I puzzled over the alien shame. I disliked it, found no reason to put a bad feeling over a wonderful one. Before long, the thing called "guilt" disappeared.

I don't know what became of her, nor, through the glowing indefinite clouds of childhood, exactly where in Ridgewood her house was.

But I've imagined finding it again, walking around the side, into the back, seeing if her and my long-ago redoubt is still, by some chance, there.

I was eight years old. It was my first kiss. And it happened in her family's doghouse.

1972-1973.

In books I sailed far from second grade. Not assigned - chosen. What did school's words on paper and sounds in air mean, when my mind could take wing and soar?

I snuck books in constantly, often two at a time: hidden in school's books or my notebook, or one in shirt, against-chest, another down my waistband, held by underwear.

One day, my math teacher paused in mid-lesson. She looked right, to the thin-aluminum-framed windows opening onto the weedy old trolley right-of-way. She said, as if surprised, "We didn't have to call that 'window.' We could've called it 'elephant,' and if we all agree it's 'elephant,' that's just as good as 'window'."

Her words went into me. I began to think on them.

1973-1974.

A few weeks before fourth grade, a letter from the Board of Education.

They'd assigned me to a new school.

As I and my new classmates rode the minibus and played and sang, I didn't know this was "special class" - or that I was diagnosed as hyperactive, defiant of authority, unable to concentrate - or that my mother and stepfather'd appeal it, to no avail.

One spring morning I sat down a few rows behind the driver - single seats, that side. She was in the seat ahead of me - tall for her age, with straight brown hair. She kept to herself, and seemed to know things without giving them away.

I wanted to feel air on me as we rolled through leafy streets. I slammed the metal-framed window forward in its track.

"Fuck!" she said. She twisted left, swiped up her right hand, smashed the window backward. I grabbed the seat-back, pulled myself half-up. I saw she'd had hand trailing out - I'd mashed her fingers between window and surrounding metal frame. She had them to lips.

"God, I'm so sorry!" I babbled. "I didn't know your hand was there! Are you okay?" She turned toward me, removed fingers, regarded me. "It's alright, you know," she said. "It's just pain."

No one'd spoken to me like that before. It confused me.

"What?" I said.

She turned around, hiked herself up in the seat, looked into my eyes, and spoke, with small gaps between each word.

"It's just pain."

She smiled, then turned forward.

I stared at her head, thrown into a depth.

I don't know her name. I've no more memories of her. But I'd think of her, in years to come, of her smile of enjoyment.

2. First Sight

1974-1977.

My parents wore down the Board. I was returned to my old school.

On the first day of sixth grade I'd pedaled down Harristown, late, past right-of-way - coasted down school sidewalk - against rules, but no one outside in bright hazy air - thrown bike into the stand, went through front doors, turned left, and, breathing bit fast, through double-doors into a lofting space.

First gym-thing was attendance. I was among last to arrive, and all'd gone into a long line, height-ordered, backs to stage - faced me, jostling and talking, boys and girls together - I crossed the fresh-wax-smell hardwood, scanning right to left, shortest to tallest - familiar, almost routine. I half-looked, half-attended, as I reached the end.

A shock.

The lights grew brighter.

I stopped walking without realizing.

I did not move or breathe.

I looked, wildly, inside me and out, for the cause.

Then I knew.

In line, at left - second from beginning. Dark, straight hair. Unmingled with those about her. Haughty, quiet - new. In that gymnasium was a line of children - but here was a woman. And suddenly, I was a man.

In that moment I discovered passion. Before I took my place in the line, I worshipped her.

When I turned to face forward, with everybody, I stood - and trembled.

We didn't speak until weeks in, but I learned what I could. Her family was new in town, her father a Swiss physicist, of all things. She, their first-born.

I'd learned her name: Sabine Marolf. I'd say it to myself through the

days, whisper it in bed at night, stressing a vowel here, shaping a rhythm there.

Nothing was too small. This was a sweet field of meaning I had not known.

Sabine was my first love.

She did not return my feelings.

I was untroubled - I'd never thought she would. I asked for nothing - picked no flowers, gave no valentines. This was admiration across distance, a special tension just seeing her. It blew through me like autumn wind: to know her, be near. I didn't badger or tease. I wanted to earn her recognition, be let in.

She was out of school the first half of one week. That Friday, as she chatted with a teacher, I caught mention of Epiphany. That, I reasoned, was why she'd been away.

That afternoon, after last bell, I caught up with her on the school sidewalk as snowflakes fell from grey. "Did you have a good Epiphany?" I said, too eagerly.

"No," she said, holding my asking invalid. She walked forward, not looking back. I watched her go, admiration darker than before.

I didn't want another, so I kept distance - though one day followed her home, ducking behind trees. I knew not if she knew.

One spring day, she closed the distance.

I came home and announced I was taking a shower. My mother told me, years later, she knew instantly I'd fallen in love.

Sabine, I continued, speaking as if I were to be made king, president, and chief justice in one, had invited me over for a game of chess.

I remember but that. There's a brief flash of her living room, but as our families'd become friendly, it may be of another occasion.

For some reason, however, that once - she reached out to me.

I hope I played well.

About twelve years later, I found my sister's 1983 yearbook. I went to Sabine's page.

She wore her hair long in a light flip, smiling, relaxed. She looked like other clear-skinned girls - except in her face a slight exotic length, her cheekbones a bit prominent.

I read through her long list of activities, then a list of liked-things - the brief telegrams by which we, at that age, try to assert who we are: "sunsets ... pina coladas ... kissing."

I felt a small crumple. Where was the icy refuser? The unreachable, impossible? Kissing this one then that, easy sunny evenings of pina coladas, the one boy, the next.

Then it came to me: she'd many sides, and the easy-smiling girl could exist with the cold-eyed princess. And though I wished my lips'd touched hers, I was glad for her.

Perhaps, had I stayed in town, our minds would've grown together and one day, Junior or Senior year, we'd have stood somewhere, a sunset before us, and shared a delicate coconut-tasting kiss.

But that was not to be.

The Board refused to expunge their psychological evaluations from my record. My parents feared this would block me from college and, thus, career.

And so I was sent to military school.

3. Plebing

September - October 1977.

My stepfather slowed for the turnoff, took it - straight road, rough-surfaced, bit uphill at first - and parked. My mother asked, and a cadet walking by told us where to go.

We entered a tall corn-colored Art Deco building - calm world of straight corridors, floors of marble and linoleum, high off-white walls. On the third floor, a cadet in black uniform, clipboard in hand, told me to stand before a door of pine.

"Listen. When you go in there, stop in front of the Lieutenant's desk and say: 'Sir, Cadet Vidouris, Second Company, Plebe, reporting for duty, Sir!' Then just stand there and listen to what he says. Don't speak, don't move or look around. If he asks a question, answer as briefly as you can and start and end with 'Sir.'"

I looked at him. "Why shouldn't I look around?" "Because they don't like that. Now repeat what you're supposed to say when you go in." We did it several times.

The door opened, a boy about my height walked out, then it was my turn. The door clicked behind me.

At a desk, a young man. Someone at the right, leaning on a radiator, arms crossed. There was a window in back of the desk - dark tree-branches and sky beyond.

I reeled off the words. The man at the desk smiled.

"Vidouris, I'm Serge Arensky. You're now a member of my Company, the 'Roaring Second'" - faintly ironic - "and I intend to make us the finest in the Battalion." He turned to the leaning cadet. "This is my JG." The JG nodded. Arensky leaned forward. I looked down surreptitiously, met his eyes. He didn't seem to mind. They were merry, persuasive.

"Listen up." His voice was quieter, as if for only us. "Plebing is not easy. When things get tough, remember this: winners never quit, and quitters never win." He paused. "Now get out of here - and make me proud of you." No one'd ever spoken to me like this. I felt inspired. "Yes, Sir," I said.

Later, I stood in afternoon sun by the car - grey river, downhill past road's end - hugged my mother, shook hands with stepfather. I crossed the lawn, walked up black steel staircase on side of Farragut Hall - great rambling wood building, once shore hotel, now dormitory - waved from landing. They waved back.

I turned and went into dim corridors, noise, and chaos.

Our world was the varying wills of the cadet officers.

We were to run when outside, in straight lines. At corners we were to halt, shout out wish for defeat of our prep-school football rival, turn ninety degrees, then run again.

When they told us to yell we were wiggly worms, were dirt, were trash - we obeyed.

When they told one of us to stand on a chair, stick out arms, make pt-pt-pt sounds with lips, pretend to be propeller plane - and another get down on knees, pretend to gun the plane and make rat-tat-tat noises - we obeyed.

When they woke us before reveille bell, told us do push-ups and sit-ups until shower-time - we obeyed.

When, one night after taps, they burst into our rooms, yelling to report to showers - and, there, had us strip and shower with hot water tapped almost off - we obeyed. When a Lieutenant named Diaz splashed icy water from a pitcher on our naked bodies, his laughter echoing off the tiles - we shivered and tried not to cry out.

The officers trained us to march in formation, spit-polished shoes falling in one blow, starting and turning and stopping as a unit, answering the cadences in a single voice. Upon command we, the Plebes of 1977, shouted out, as one, "Sir, yes, Sir!"

They were forbidden to punch, but it happened on dorm floors - out of adult sight - and consequences of reporting were unpleasant. Much was

thus: there was an Administration, but they were far away - and between them and us stood those charged with interpreting, enforcing, reporting violations: the officers themselves.

I didn't know how to handle the punches, then remembered reverse psychology. I began walking up, challenging them, with a smile, to punch my upper left arm, hard as they could. The first ones hurt, but I discovered that tensing that arm only and relaxing my mind and the rest of my body made the momentary pain-shock easier to bear.

Soon the upper arm was solidly black-and-blue - and numb. Whether punches hurt or not, I'd keep an untroubled smile, ask if they'd like another go. For a time they brought football players over to land smashes. I never broke - became known, even slight respect, as seventh-grader who'd not only not run crying to the Administration, but smile. Soon it paid off. Hitting of me stopped, even the normal. It was no fun, for I didn't suffer.

I began finding such clearings wherever I could in the all-thorned forest-world of the military school.

On the concrete parade-blocks, as we fell in for evening meal, I'd look at the western sky. My arm buzzing-numb, I'd stand, head lifted to yellow-and-blue horizon as night rose at our backs, and see the first stars, and for a few moments pass far away from the Academy.

Then the command would come through the evening air for us to march in and eat our suppers.

4. The Darkness

Autumn-Winter 1977.

We of the Junior School - fifth through eighth grades - were housed on the lower dorm floor of Farragut Hall on the river, directly over corporate offices and mess hall. Some of the Upper School lived over us - on top floor - but most were on two highest floors of corn-colored Dupont Hall, toward back of campus.

Our floor was managed by a few Upper School officers who roomed there. The physically-strongest Upper Schoolers - generally football players - held almost equal sway.

Junior School was also ruled from within.

In the first weeks, a pack of the most confident, aggressive seventh and eighth graders had formed - five or six in number. It centered on an eighth-grader named Matthew Mellini.

Tall for his age - narrow long face, light olive skin, full lips - voice deeper than others, quick with pointed words - had youth's quick detection of pretension or weak spots - could project a silent, cold malignity by eyes alone - carried himself as ready to attack, though I never saw him land a blow. His air alone scared.

It began one day in mid-autumn.

On a Tuesday afternoon - we were given several dollars' allowance - he took me aside, said I was to give it to him or he'd beat me. I put the two one-dollar bills into his hand. There was no question in my frozen heart of defying him - then or weeks to follow. He came up, I handed the money, and he went away.

One day, something moved inside me, stronger than not wanting to be beaten up.

{ *no more* }

I ducked him, long as I could, but one afternoon I was walking over leaves, parking lot back of Dupont, between gymnasium and the audito-

rium-chapel. He appeared as if from nowhere. No one was around. There was no expression to his face. He spoke coldly and quietly. "Give me the money, or you're gonna get beat."

My heart pounded, but I shook my head. He looked at me. "Come with me," he said, and walked away from the gym.

He opened the metal door, walked beside the elevated stage (wrapped in grey curtains), straight to the door to the white-wall auditorium proper. He stopped, looked out at seats under broad windows - quiet, empty, unlit. He shut door, then turned stageward and went up - held curtains open, motioned - let go folds - they rustled, falling into place.

We stood on planks in dusty stuffy air - radiator on far wall clanked, altar and chaplain's chair stacked neatly beside.

"Since you don't want to give me the money," he said, "this is your punishment. Take down your pants."

I pushed them to ankles, crouching, then straightened. I didn't feel my heart anymore.

"Take down your underpants." I did it. He took a ballpoint pen from his pocket. I stood there as he walked. He pointed it at my stomach, then lower, then touched it to the side of my penis and began to make squiggle marks.

I looked down and watched him make shapes along it and on the tip. It didn't hurt. He said nothing. His face wore the same expression as always.

He poked it a few times with the pen, looked up and said, eyebrows going up, "You know, your dick is quite small." "Yeah, I know." "There's a way to make it bigger," he said, softer.

I looked at him, suspicious.

"Will it hurt?" "No." "You promise?" "I promise." "Okay."

He put the pen in his pocket, told me to pull up pants, said "Come on," left the stage, went down stairs, opened metal door.

He walked over leaves, up gym steps, through door, left, immediate right at closed door of athletic director, then up stairs. I'd never reached Robison Hall's top floor - was off-limits - but I knew from trying that the door was locked.

He reached in his pocket, pulled out steel loop tight with keys. He stuck one key out, guided it into lock, turned, opened door and walked

through. He turned left, walked down a creaking wood-floored corridor to a door half-ajar.

Pieces of yellowed paper strewn - little writing-desk, veneer-strips peeled off, against a wall - by it, two old wooden class-chairs, one atop other - window over football field - beyond, frontage-road, river behind - good view, came distant thought - walls streaked brown - air close, hot, unmoving - smelled of cooked dust.

He shut door, then pointed at my pants. "Take them down." I did it.

He nodded at a far corner. "Now go there and piss." I was recovering some of my mind. I wondered what it was supposed to do. I didn't think I had to go, but eventually went until he said, voice harder, reflecting off walls, "Stop. Now come over here."

I stopped - wondering dimly if he'd wanted me to so I could turn it off - and turned around. He was standing in the same place, but now his pants and underwear were below his knees.

His dick stuck straight out from between his legs, a little hair around where it came from the rest of his body.

He said "Come here."

I walked to him. His face had the same non-expression. He said, "Now get down and suck my cock." I crouched with my pants and underwear still down. The grit stung my knees.

I looked at the thing pointing. It was pale mostly - red-pink rim by the front part - whole thing arced up. I opened my lips, leaned forward, felt it enter my mouth.

Its stuffing my mouth made my stomach tight. It was near the back of my mouth, I smelled an odor like cheese from his body. It tasted cheese-like. It went further, almost back of throat, felt weird, then bad, and I almost threw up. Gagging, I pulled back.

"No. Not like that. Stand up."

I stood up. He got on his knees before me and put his mouth round my dick.

His lips and inside of his mouth and his tongue felt warm and wet. No pleasure. His head moved - I knew he was trying to show me. I hoped I wouldn't have to again. He stopped after a while and got up.

He put his hand on my cock. "When I'm not around, do this." He moved his hand back and forth, roughly. "Do it yourself, now." I did it.

Something happened. My cock stirred of its own accord. Warmth flowed. It stiffened and grew and rose. It became bigger. Little pleasures ran along its length.

"You're popping a rod," he said, and smiled coldly.

I was regaining more mind. Strange, I thought, something from working on cars. As I continued, I looked up suddenly. "That's masturbation!" I said, knowing how naive I sounded. He smiled contemptuously.

He pulled up pants, told me to do same. He walked out onto creaking boards, opened door, went down step, turned, pulled out loop, locked - went down, past coach's door, out, down steps.

He stepped down from concrete sidewalk, stopped on asphalt, near where he'd caught up with me. He pushed his finger into my chest, not hard, looked into my eyes.

"Don't tell anyone about this," he said, "or I'll kill you."

He walked away.

I remember nothing more of that day.

This was my introduction to sex.

5. Pieces

Winter 1977 - Spring 1978.

Amid the great memory-plain of the rest of seventh grade stand six pillars. There is little else. Here, in order, are the inscriptions.

A freezing riverside night of blue-white stars. It was a few dozen minutes before taps.

He saw me in the corridor. He quietly said "Follow me." He walked outside down a grey-silver steel staircase, paced around campus a while, then returned to Farragut. He stopped beneath the stairs which rose on grey-silver poles. He told me to lay on a concrete pole-foundation and take down my pants.

Little rocks stung the skin of my ass. He went on his knees between my legs and sucked my dick into his mouth. This time the warm wetness pressure pierced me in sudden shock of pleasures and I became hard immediately. Space elongated, as if lower body were far away and feeling-pulses had to travel great spaces to mind. I raised my head, looked at him as the new sensations continued. I saw his lips round my dick, his eyes turned down to task. He pulled back. I saw teeth in night. He made little bites up and down shaft. It made sensations stronger, better.

I put my head down. I didn't moan or move. I didn't climax. I lay there. He stopped after a while, got up, and told me to get dressed and go back inside.

I'd returned from leave - an officer'd said my roommate was being held in infirmary for pick-up by parents. I learned he'd knocked a hole in our wall, hung bathrobe over, for weeks been digging down with broom-handle and packing the resulting small crypt with matches and papers. His

confessed plan'd been to fill it with inflammables and blow up - or at least incinerate - the Hall.

Thus had I become the only Junior Schooler with a room of his own.

One night, minute before taps, Mellini appeared at door, whispered he'd return. I lay rigid under wool blanket - heart hammered - radiator ticking, hissed - hoped he'd not come, had fallen asleep or forgotten. But once floor silent he put head in, whispered for me to get up - walked silently down fully-lit corridors, opened his door - dark inside, neither roommate there - must've been weekend, they home on leave. He shut door, told me lie in bed, strip off pajamas. His mouth on my dick again - pleasures again, not as intense.

I heard him say, in higher voice, "Do you like this?" I knew what he wanted to hear. "Yes." "Does it feel good?" "Yes," I said, without emotion. I don't remember him stopping or how I got back to my room, but it wasn't long.

A sunny day, perhaps on spring's earliest edge.

Clark Hall - an old dormitory, part-way converted years before to foul-weather parade-blocks and auxiliary basketball court. Small section of dorm floor'd been retained - abandoned, locked. He'd told me to follow, walked up black steel staircase against Hall - exposed across center of campus - reached black metal door, pulled out keys, unlocked, looked over shoulder, stepped inside, shut it.

Stale air, dim shapes. He went left, through doorway into suite of rooms. Years of dust on everything - desks and chairs in jangled piles - afternoon light slanting from smeared windows. He looked around, as if new to him, went inside shower stall jury-rigged from plywood and pipes - teacher must've lived here - told me to get on knees. He opened pants, took out his dick - big, sticking out like first time - said to suck. I took in my mouth, gagged again, pulled back.

He said to get up, voice sharp, and walked to pile of desks and chairs by southwest window. He told me to take down pants and underwear and

bend face-down, over desk. In buzzing numbness I felt him stand behind - something poke my ass - then thrusts, on and on, him silent - squirting, wetness running down ass and legs, then he stood back.

"You tell anybody about this," voice flat, taking his pants up, "it'll be your last day of life. Pull up your underwear. C'mon, let's go."

He opened door, stepped out quickly, locked.

As he walked down steps I wondered why I floated in blankness - why light of day seemed so bright - why nothing seemed real.

Weeks of deepening silence. He hadn't touched me but the four times. I carried it with me.

Each allowance-day, I'd handed the money.

One day, as spring was starting to come, he walked up on the dorm floor and stopped.

I knew what he wanted. It would've been easy to give.

Something that hadn't to do with safety or ease moved. It rose. It pushed aside the paralysis of obedience, quietly stemmed the tide of fright. I shook my head.

His face went blank. "Come with me," he said. His voice was colder than ever. He began to walk - past central inside stairwell - left, into bathroom - past white-enamel sinks with chrome spigots - right, into long room with floor of small black and white tiles - toilets - white-washed open stalls.

He pointed to a toilet - on right, near rear wall - said, "Sit there and jerk off until I come back." I sat down - he turned on heel and left - unthinking, unfeeling, I unzipped - took my dick, jerked off, looking down - no erection, no feeling - only motion.

His steps sounded in the sink-room. He rounded corner, stood over me.

His face wasn't blank.

It was tight and cold with fury.

The world became an unbroken snow-field.

"You know what's going to happen now, don't you?"

Time stretched. There was all the space in the world to answer, and I answered quietly, so quietly and easily, my word a raindrop falling on a vast lake without a ripple.

"Yes."

Time halted.

There was screaming.

It was coming from me.

I stood up as if eight feet tall.

I brushed past him, roaring wordlessly.

I rounded the corner, passed the wash-basins.

Steps pounded outside. I walked out the door shrieking.

I was met in the corridor by a growing phalanx of cadet officers.

"What's wrong, kid?" "Calm down." "Hey, what's wrong?"

I didn't stop screaming. My knees felt like water.

My head was empty but clear as empty sky.

I saw him slink into the hallway.

He hid behind the officers.

I pointed at Mellini.

"Him!" I shouted.

Stairwell doors slammed open - usually-stern face of Donald Langen, supply officer, now worried, intent - his office far from stairs - realized how loud. "What's going on here?" barked Langen.

"What'd he do?" an officer asked.

Words wouldn't come. I swallowed, then could shout. "Bad things! *Gay* things!"

(I'm sorry, gay people of now. It was the only word I had back then.)

I began to scream again.

Mellini whined, turning head slightly aside, "Aww, the kid's lyin'!"

An officer whirled on him, shouted, "Shut the fuck up and get out of here! *Get out!*" He slammed hands against Mellini's chest. Mellini staggered back, then melted away.

Langen looked at an officer, told him to take me to the Commandant, turned sharply and went downstairs.

My screaming was diminishing. In its place was coming crying - and laughter.

Two officers slung my arms over their shoulders, half-led, half-carried me down the grey-silver staircase, across campus as I cried, laughed, gibbered - drunk on air on my face - telling it all, telling it true, into open air, echoes off Shepard Hall of Music Department and Canteen, Clark Hall across tennis courts and pool, the high walls of Dupont. My voice sounded across the Academy.

We walked through Dupont's front doors, I quieted, tried to breathe. I reflexively felt down - pants zipped, no idea how - then through lobby, through Administration offices directly to an inner office I'd never seen.

They sat me in a chair and left the room. The door shut. I was looking into the broad leathered old face of Captain Fredrick Jenyss, retired of the Navy.

I didn't know what he'd say, didn't know if I was in trouble. He looked across the desk and smiled. It was not of pity, nor of irony. It was of strength and caring. And he spoke.

"Vidouris, I'm an old salt. I was in the Navy for thirty years and there's nothing that's going to shock me. So you just tell me what happened - and we'll put it right."

I looked into his eyes, felt my body relax, and knew that somehow this was going to be okay.

I told much as I could - mentioned key-loop several times, doors it'd opened, what was inside rooms - for evidence.

When done, he wrote on a paper. "This is my home number. If anyone gives you any trouble at all, anyone even looks at you *cross-eyed* - call me, day or night." He asked if I felt I could go to rifle-drill.

After sitting with him and finding nothing but dignity and acceptance, I felt I could do anything. I rose, he rose with me, and he put his hand on my shoulder.

I walked, shaking, to the armory in Robison basement. As I exited, rifle in hand, I heard hushed voices and a snicker from a pair of cadets walking ahead. One said, so I'd hear, "He thought he could get pregnant - that's why he messed around with Mellini." I thought of the paper in my pocket. No, I thought. I'm going to be strong for Captain Jenyss.

I joined drill. Nothing was said - but careful silences, quick looks from corners-of-eyes.

I'd stowed rifle, was walking into my room - noticed door ajar - saw, in window-light, something different on its outside surface - drew closer - letters, carved into pine -

QUEER

"My fault, eh?" I thought. I felt contempt for them. I walked in, stopped, sniffed - looked at my bed.

Someone, or more than one, had pissed - sheets, mattress, pillow yellow-spattered. Thus'd they answered my charges against the leader.

He never touched me again.

A day in blooming spring - the finding and reading, in the Academy library, of a book.

I came across a heavy old hardcover in fiction under "H" - front jacket a stylized railroad scene - two rails disappearing into tunnel portal below mountains - outsized red stop-signal hanging in space - photo at back showed a spiritual-eyed woman looking toward the ceiling, seeming ready to float. Dust on book-top.

I opened at random. My eye fell on a railroad disaster. This writer knew her stuff. Her description thrilled me. It didn't sit on the page - it was as if written in electricity. For weeks I'd find the novel by looks alone - was always there - and I'd open to the wreck.

Curiosity stirred. I went to the beginning.

It took me by the throat. It became my world. I'd no checkout privileges - too young - so spent every minute I could.

Three or four days after, realized that day I'd finish it. I turned pages, frenzied, unendurable tension, feeling as if my head would split from the growing light.

I was taken, taken as never before.

The end came, and I fell back against the library chair.

As I sat, dazed, I heard a voice in my head. It was not my voice. It was of an older man of great authority.

"Remember this," he said. "Remember this moment always. *This* is important."

Misfiled, unlooked-at for years - I'd found *Atlas Shrugged.*

A day in late spring - full leaves, sky brightening toward summer.

I was walking to gym - had exited auditorium-chapel, cut onto parking lot - thought came of what'd begun here - then flow ceased.

Abruptness attracted - I tried to get details - felt something resist - tried - felt myself shy back from what I wanted to do.

I'd never felt so. I realized, confused, I was trying to forget.

She'd said in her book to never evade. I didn't want any of me left abandoned, locked. I vowed, standing under sun and leaves, to stop it.

I began to force myself to remember. I tested details for clarity every day. If I found them fuzzy, I sharpened them; if I retracted, I pushed myself forward.

I fixed realities in my memory. I ripped every difference between them and me.

I bathed in them.

In less than a year, my mind no longer tried to forget.

I'd destroyed the reflex to pull away.

I told no one.

II. MASTERS AND MARRIAGE

1978-1998

You meet the other.
… Neither of you say anything.
Who or what you are is paper-thin. The veil is torn.

- Janwillem van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror* (1974)

1. Kendrick

Autumn 1978.

In September, I donned the uniform of black serge.

I'd wear it through that grade, then the next, and the next, and next, and the next.

I'd walk the campus, watch Plebes running and yelling, hear officers shouting and laughing - and remember.

Whether he was quietly not invited or some other reason, I do not know, but he didn't return after my first year.

I never saw Mellini again.

June 1980 - December 1981.

In the first few weeks of summer vacation, reading my way through library railroad stacks, I'd found a book - the stories of the old trolley line - not just the cars, but the people who'd ridden and run them, so warm and knowing I'd felt them - and he who'd written it. He'd been one of them - worked in the 1910s as conductor, then motorman.

Now I stood, waiting for him to answer my touch on his doorbell.

After I'd absorbed the book, desire'd stirred. I had to know him. I didn't consider he'd been born in 1894 or that his book'd come out in 1968. I knew only it was special, that the old dust-jacket placed him thirty miles away, and I *would* speak with him.

One day, riding my bike, I'd gone to a deli payphone and dialed Directory Assistance. They'd found listing. He was there! I'd pedaled home, told my mother.

"Famous writers don't like to be bothered," she'd said, a bit prim - told me not to contact - I'd promised - run upstairs to grab quarters and dimes - flown back to deli - dialed.

Many rings, then a quavering strong voice'd said, "Ahoy!" I'd said I was calling from one of the towns on the old line - I'd found his book in

the library and loved it.

Within five minutes he'd given his home address.

Few days later, I'd told my mother I was off to ride trains all day - ridden to Hudson's shore, then west on the old electrics. I'd walked the quiet streets of Summit, past the grand old wooden houses, turned at two white rocks, walked into a garden, up a few stone steps to a door, and rung a bell.

Footsteps - louder - then an open door and I'm looking into sparkling blue eyes under shock of pure-white hair. "Hello, Mike!" he said, grinning.

We shook hands, then walked through an entrance-hall, then left, along a hallway through a vast pipe organ he'd built into his house, and out into the music room.

Floor of marble - soaring ceiling - toward center, Chickering concert grand piano - in corner, harpsichord he'd built with his own hands - in another, concert harp (his wife's, he said, smiling) - on wall behind, oil painting of ship at anchor by jungle - painted it, he said, while exploring Pacific on a tramp steamer in the 1910s.

We sat down on cushioned couches to talk.

I was 15 years old and E. Jay Kendrick was 86.

It mattered not. We were friends.

I visited as often as I could - through summer, then whenever on leave from the Academy.

We spoke of our lives, the things we'd found, inexhaustibly, as if driven. We spoke on equal terms - he said more than I, but to all I said he listened with complete attention.

I brought my family to visit. First my sister and mother (who'd laughingly forgiven my lies), then my stepfather - Kendrick was the only person I ever saw him treat with respect.

One October day in 1981, I'd brought my Academy roommate, Stan.

When it came time to leave, he'd walked down the stone steps with me. I turned in the garden and said, "Well, Commander, I've nobody left to introduce. I've no more excuses to come see you."

He looked into my eyes. "Mike, you don't need any excuses. If you want to come over, just ring me on the phone - and come."

"Okay. I will."

We held the look, smiling, then I turned and walked forward. At the road, I looked back. He'd gone forward in his garden and was looking at me, autumn colors behind, muted but strong.

We waved, then Stan and I walked back to the station, talking all the while of he whom we'd just met.

He died, suddenly, the next month. We never had that unexcused visit. Yet it was as though it had already happened.

A few weeks after, I called on his widow. She pointed to a pile of leather satchels and suitcases on hardwood floor in a room-corner upstairs. "What are those?" I asked.

"Oh, they're for you. Jay wanted you to have them."

I went over and opened.

My breath stopped. My eyes grew wet.

They were the last records of the trolley company - and the manuscript and photos from his memoirs.

He'd left me his life.

The rest of his bequest, more precious yet, was invisible and inside me.

He'd taught me how to live.

2. Rand

1980-1981.

Before I was sixteen I'd read all the books. I knew there was much I did not grasp, and a tensed tone kept me away - but her voice cut through everything.

She still lived, elderly and reclusive in Manhattan, and I grew curious. I did research, found address at which she'd published her last periodical.

I rode in one morning, walked down 34th, past Empire State, then further, wondering what I'd find as address-numerals went up. I stopped at the little doorside plaque: "120 East 34th Street." An apartment building - my heart went faster.

I went to bell-box - columns of names, apartment numbers stamped over each. I read down - toward bottom left, old red Dymo tape, white-lettered, peeling at one edge, slightly grimed.

F. O'CONNOR

Her husband - dedication of *Atlas Shrugged* - two men - him and her young student, Nathaniel Branden.

I wondered if she'd answer, talk to me for a moment. I felt she'd disapprove of one uninvited. I didn't want the faintest mar. I backed away then ran, as if stung, all the way to Penn Station.

That weekend, I rode in, walked 34th, light slanting ahead, stopped in front, looked up.

The doorman came out, asked if he could help - I asked, as if the most natural thing, if I was pointing to Mr O'Connor's. He moved my finger a little. I walked across 34th to the bus kiosk, near Lexington, leaned against it. As sun descended, I waited.

I stood for about two hours.

The Empire was an unlit bulk against orange dusk when the lights in the apartment went on.

Unbidden, the thought came: Ayn Rand and I are looking at the same light.

I stood for a few minutes, looking, then walked quietly up the street.

In the next few months, I went back several times.

One evening, I spoke in my mind.

You'll never know I was here. We'll never speak. But you have changed me, and I do this in respect, and gratitude, so that I can carry it with me into life - so we'll have had just this …

One evening, I knew it was done.

At dusk, I watched the lights go on.

I said, inside me, "Good-bye."

I turned and walked west, wind shifting against me, then behind, fluttering my coat about me, beneath the buildings, as I headed back.

3. Branden

January 1982.

They'd been together many years, then broke a few years after I was born.

I'd learned he was running a psychology workshop in Manhattan over a weekend. The Academy'd granted special leave, and on Friday afternoon I and two hundred others had entered a hotel ballroom and begun exercises - individually, in pairs, in small groups - shocking in their revelation of self, others, and life-potential.

It was Sunday afternoon, and soon it'd end. I stood by a table, staring as he signed books and talked to each person. It didn't occur to me he'd see me - I felt like a camera. The next person - an anarchist with whom I'd tangled a few hours earlier - set a book before Nathaniel Branden.

He signed with flourish, then looked up, brows up, funny pursed-lip smile. "So, Robert, what do you think of" - his eyes went to my name-tag - "Michael here?"

My breath caught.

"Eh," said Robert, glancing at me with some disdain, "he's too much of an Objectivist." "I can tell that," Branden said archly, "from the way he sits." A piquant game, I saw, had begun.

"All right, Dr Branden," I said. "How do Objectivists *sit*?" He leaned back, looked me in the eye, and said, with theatrical relish, "With in-n-n-sufficient relaxation."

I begin to think into this, to find my unrelaxes.

At its end, he opened the floor to who wished to speak. I told of the impact of the exercises. He answered from the platform for a long time, and I stood looking at him across space. His eyes were intent as he said to me, "Our consciousness is our *core*."

This went into me, deeply.

My mother would tell me, years later, that this weekend began my introspection.

January-July 1982.

I became friendly with a woman from the workshop: Babe Stephens, broad-shouldered, determined - walked into New York evening, black cape, hand raised in farewell - worked in neurology in midtown hospital. I'd ride to apartment, talk, play records, look through floor-to-ceiling bookshelves - reverently touch autographed paperback - "To Babe Stephens - Cordially, Ayn Rand."

Babe looked up at me from couch. "She'd have liked you, very much." I swallowed.

"Are you serious?" "Oh yes. She loved young men."

One day, she was reminiscing about old days. "It was an incredible time," she said. "Everything was expanding. Nathaniel'd come out with the Theory of Psychological Visibility." (That each human consciousness has profound need to experience its values and aspirations mirrored in another consciousness.)

"What a revolution!" I chirped.

"And an evolution." She paused and frowned. "I was at the NBI dance where Ayn saw him dancing with a beautiful girl, about 1965."

"You were *there*?"

"Oh yes. Frank held the elevator for me, and when I got in I found Nathaniel and Patrecia - that was her name - and Barbara and Ayn there. We rode down together."

I listened, fascinated. "What did Ayn say to Nathaniel?"

"Nothing. But she was looking daggers. And the body language - it was easy to read."

I began to wonder about "body language." How could you talk without words? She told me of a psychologist named Reich - he'd said the body has a language, a wordless one you can understand on its own terms, but you can't be tensed or you get it all wrong.

Reich's and Branden's words flowed together. I remembered my self-training at the Academy. All the same, wasn't it? Non-resistance.

As time went on, I'd think of the beautiful dancer who'd made Rand so angry.

September 1982 - January 1983.

I'd seen five Senior classes stand for nine months, graduate, and leave. Now it was our turn.

I was the longest-boarded of my class, and the Plebes looked at me as if a Pre-Cambrian marvel. They'd come up, tentatively, ask what it'd been like, old days; I'd try to tell.

I, alone of all, was given a room of my own in Farragut, still home to Junior School. This private room, unheard-of in any's memory, was their silent recognition of my endurance.

It was few doors from where I'd slept, first year. It was next to the bathroom.

I'd kept my heading on freedom those years. I'd wanted to run, badly, but something that hadn't to do with present advantage had bidden me stay.

I would make it through.

❧

I'd known no more sex - but I knew sex in me. I'd begun masturbating in eighth grade, and I did it every day, several times - in my room, covertly in study hall or bathrooms or on home-bound bus. I'd no guilt, no shame.

I didn't imagine sex with persons. At times I'd remember his teeth on my cock - it was a dark thrill. But for me, in the main, sexuality was third force, unattached to gender. I wouldn't have called it such, but I took it as ambient energy.

Streams of heteroporn flowed along the dorm corridors, up and down the floor-levels. Sometimes - not while masturbating - I looked. The books did nought for me, but I liked the pictures - when women looked strong, alive, themselves.

I felt nothing for men in them - yet was in grip of something I couldn't shake: a passion for one of my classmates. Ted Sanders - golden-haired green-eyed smiling horseman - and fellow taker-lightly of the Academy - had my heart. When he was near, I could look only at him. Each of his words was happiness.

No girl'd ever made me feel that. I wondered if I was gay. I tried to

imagine sex with him, but it didn't work. If I were gay, I reasoned, I'd want to - wouldn't I?

If I was gay, that'd be that. I'd accept it. But I'd been surrounded by males - my first experience'd been with a male. To turn out gay seemed too easy, too pat.

Yet how could I know what I was, without experience?

And having sex with a girl seemed as far away as Andromeda.

Her eyes caught me, then the golden twist of hair falling down the tan strong bikini'd curves of her body - it was a magazine photo, tacked up amid cans of anti-fouling paint, power-drills, and scraps of old wood in the boat shop.

I decided to have an experience with an icon's help. I looked round, pulled out the tack, pocketed photo, left.

That night, winter winds without, it was time of pleasure. I kept my lamp on and held the photo.

As I neared electric surge-out of orgasm, I focused my feelings upon her - imagined breaking through distance, through not knowing her - imagined being close to her, our talking, our skins touching, out-struck curve of her hip under my hands - and I came, eyes locked on the sun-flooded self of Christie Brinkley.

He'd brought into my life what I'd not asked for. He'd willed me toward men.

I willed myself toward Woman.

4. Horowitz

October 1982 - Spring 1983.

One windy Saturday, on liberty, I'd walked several miles - next town - ambled up garage-sale driveway, seen classical albums - one dollar each. One, ornate from 1960s, spoke of great pianist making historic comeback after twelve years - first piece, Bach organ work on modern piano. I'd handed over an allowance-dollar.

On Monday, I dropped Music Department needle on first track. Applause, then silence - then sounds I'd never imagined. Who was this man? How could he do this? I saved allowance to buy every album I could.

One Friday afternoon I ran lines outside Shepard Hall, rigged amp cabinets to record player, blasted the imperial chords of his 1978 Rachmaninoff *Piano Concerto No. 3* beyond campus.

As the music went out I looked at downhill road, autumn river beyond, and knew in time I'd make it.

This musician of tremulous sensitivity and electric power became my hero. As winter ended I asked the music director how notation worked, began teaching myself.

Six weeks later I debuted at the spring concert - Beethoven and Bach.

June - September 1983.

On graduation day I told Ted my feelings. He heard with grace, and we remained friends.

I went home, and it was almost dazing: no Academy in fall - not again.

I was off, instead, to a small college of philosophers, ponderers of the Western canon, in Annapolis - across the street from the mansard roofs and vast marching grounds of the USNA.

September 1983 - June 1985.

My own copy of the Academy's blue-bound rulebook was in a box in a closet, back home. Now ideas came bustling. As Rand had enjoined, I went to fundamentals.

The problems of Western philosophy rose before me. I glimpsed a great and troubled architecture.

There were moments, too, of something other than theory.

One was in a Plato-dialogue. A man setting up a drinking party declares that none shall be forced to imbibe.

I move, in the next place, that the flute-girl, who has just made her appearance, be told to go away and play to herself, or, if she likes, to the women who are within.

I felt dislike. Who was this Eryximachus, man of Athens, to say this? "Here," said a voice quietly in me. "They went wrong." I wanted to defend the flute-girl, somehow. I told myself one day I would.

Another was listening to people enthuse over Socrates' examined life - thought came, and I dashed a note.

Perhaps a period of leading the <u>unexamined</u> life is necessary, so the self will have some actual content.

Socrates' way seemed to contain a turning-in, self self-examining, a vacuum emerging. Thought of Branden and Reich, though I didn't know why.

Another was reading Spinoza. He said there had to be direct contact with truth, for with an infinite number of steps we'd never arrive. Immediately I felt at home with the world - though I'd not have called it that.

My mind-ideal was expanding.

15 December 1985.

He'd walked out, and we'd stood.

Amid our hails, he'd moved his gaze across front row - brief eye-contacts - my heart'd begun to pound - then we were looking at each other.

Something'd stirred in me - I'd shot my arm out, given a thumb's-up - his eyebrows'd leaped up, he'd grinned and pointed, waggled hand back and forth.

We'd continued, in between-times, gesturing, looking into each other's eyes.

In the mid-time, people'd come, asked how we'd met, become friends - I'd said I'd never seen him before this day.

Now he was directly above - taking last bows.

I looked up at him, waved.

He looked down, smiled, recognizing.

Our eyes met, deeper this time.

Something stirred in me.

I pointed with my index finger, jabbing a few times: first my breast, then my heart, then up at him, mouthing it - "I - love - you."

And he, who'd looked into the eyes of Siloti - who'd looked into the eyes of Liszt - who'd looked into the eyes of Beethoven - who'd looked into the eyes of Mozart - pointed to his breast, then his heart, then to me - mouthing the words - and bowed to me, one last time, smiling.

At that moment, a light flashed.

The photograph appeared in the *Times* the next day.

He walked off the stage of Carnegie Hall.

I never saw Vladimir Horowitz again.

5. Beth

1983 - 1987.

At the College, among girls, my feelings for Ted lessened. Yet I felt no passion for any person. There were ferments of intellect, but never was I finally, completely roused.

Passion was what I wanted. So I stayed apart, cautious - picky - and waited. I knew I'd know.

I and the College were dissatisfied, and I left after two years. In the last week, passion-words and looks with the guitar-slasher punk Dani from town. We talked endlessly that summer, by phone vowed our love, but as autumn came she faded - I visited, she was hostile, ignored all she'd said when times were good, abruptly denounced me - I wasn't a real musician, wasting time with books.

I hoisted my travel-bag, and we parted. Back home I wrote bitterly.

A strange ecstasy, that is not pursued.

I began making philosophic notes on scrap paper - in outer life, plunged into working-class world - liquor store, shoe department, lumber seller. As I lifted kegs, measured insteps, drove forklifts, finally came contact with women.

Regina, who taught seething truth of woman-sex - yet not proof against religion-guilt.

Claire, who taught bright sweetness - and not to glide over depths.

Judee, who taught sweep-of-time, brush-of-darkness - and never to stand frozen in oneself.

Nancy, who taught necessity of passion - not let life grow grey, slump-shouldered.

Each began with warmth, care - yet felt incomplete. Some part of me was always out, so I never fully committed to them. I did not pretend to.

January 1988 - September 1998.

Left home - rented room - day I arrived, landlord's wife left, final time - he embarked on epic drunk.

Nights later, he tottered in - pressed phone to my ear - personal ads - thrice I refused - he pressed, insistent - suddenly, a voice - deep in pitch, light in merry.

I began to laugh - she was ugly - often frightened children and dogs - mainly listened to others' problems - outran bill collectors - didn't drink, as people hate when you vomit in back seat - was drug free - today's prices! - and last time had sex, they hadn't discovered AIDS yet.

Then, serious voice - "If you can read between the lines of this ad, and *think* you're capable of independent thought - perhaps you're the one I've been - holding out for."

Her ad skewered every I'd just heard. She stood out like the sun in a banal sky.

I asked landlord for a beer, wrote letter of cheeky color, mailed. Five dollars to service meant two days' breakroom cream, sugar, and coffee for food.

I called, to hear again - wondered what she was like - sometimes called before sleep on mattress on floor - didn't know what intrigued, exactly - some unusual poise, how she put things together.

One night, recording gone - I called service - they could tell nothing - no, couldn't relay a letter.

Weeks passed. I almost forgot. Night-ship, no trace.

One evening, she left message with landlord. He called my work - I rang her instantly on lumber department's dime - she'd received my letter, forty-three more the day before.

I was the one she'd called.

In the next two weeks, we talked endlessly. We called it an era of surfaces - thin, mendacious, unpassionate. She spoke of growing up in mid-1970s - born in '58 - in a world of sexual and emotional freedom come and gone - spoke of marathon-running and disco-dancing all night as if a legendary age.

We expanded in the joy we took in one another's being. One night, after we'd talked nine hours, I told her I loved her.

She gasped.

I'd seen no image of her. I felt no need.

We met on a Sunday morning.

I found within this well-curved, redheaded woman with huge green eyes a spirit so large no one moment could bear her. She overflowed the present.

We made love that night, time upon time.

It was my homecoming.

I never went back to lumber.

I proposed that Tuesday morning.

She'd told me, before Sunday, she'd been abused.

Mother'd stopped with beatings, chokings - father'd used her for sex pleasures from an early age. There'd been damage - but there was also powerful will to life, to health.

She told what it'd been like to be smart and attractive - men who disregarded the mind, coveted the body - evils committed upon children - women's history classes in '70s - monogamy as patriarchy's attempt to keep women as property.

I began to ponder what it meant to be male. I discerned a great disturbance between genders - would look at quiet houses, wonder at secret shatterings behind closed doors, drawn blinds.

I saw the path opening, broad before me. I'd walk it with her, through the good and the bad.

We married, five weeks after first-touch.

At Academy and College, the world of women'd seemed unreachable. Now we cleaved to one another, were as one flesh.

In autumn of '88 my mother left him - next summer, Beth and I followed - California - lived first with Goosie - known thus to all - in same ranch-house in western hills above Peninsula - where my grandfather'd died.

Leaving New Jersey provoked crises in Beth. Long-suppressed memories rose and stayed. Sex for her became frightening, complicated. Our incandescent happiness turned occluded.

I'd known first erotic happiness with her. I would not believe it'd gone. The damage had been caused by force, by uncaring - so patience'd solve, heal.

We turned to the paths of her life, further, further back into incomparably complex story. I summoned all I could from my reading and living to help her find the way back.

We stretched our fingers to the elusive wholeness.

In meantime, we worked to establish ourselves in new state and culture. I found my way into mortgages, Beth into the writing for which she was so naturally equipped.

We loved, we explored, we battled - and slowly, healed.

On October's last day in 1992, Goosie took Beth to regular medical exam while I worked. I drove in evening light to Goosie's to get her. I drove uphill - she was standing by mailbox, face haunted.

She got in, said she needed mammogram. The doctor'd found a lump.

Radiologist walked out with the same paled face.

A knife in the hand of a great surgeon cut it out.

Eight weeks' searing radiation - six months' nauseating chemicals - near-deadly staph infection - more of her breast excised - then, at last, tests showed no more active cancer.

She took it as spur - strategized entry into writing - first several small novels - then massive one - emotive tearing-bare of Northern California - then yet-longer life-memoir - "Can't see how I'd bring it in anywhere under 2,000 pages" - then skies'd be clear.

She began them all, at once. She turned, effortless, between. When I came home she'd unfold worlds to me.

I'd never known such pride in another person.

Amid the far-planned working, in March of 1997 her back began to hurt. She tried walking, stretching, liniments, bed rest. Nothing helped.

Pain worse - walking turned difficult - mid-June, she fell, couldn't get up - ambulance came.

Cancer had returned in spine and bone marrow. Radiation stopped spinal - but not before it stole her legs. She was paralyzed: void from hips down.

It was inoperable. There'd be no recovering.

She was in hospital for five weeks.

On her birthday, she returned home. Strange new thing in living room - invalid's bed, wheelchair by side. A nurse taught me to inject blood-thinner.

We didn't speak of death directly. We'd fought so much just to be together.

Her bearing was Stoic. She wouldn't permit loss of self-control. If the cancer spread to brain, she said, she'd end her life. I prayed to the universe the day not come when I'd have to help my wife commit suicide. Anything but that.

She'd cheated death before. I prayed she would again. And she forged on - worked on the first small novel.

There were rallies. Blood transfusions helped. In time she could get herself into wheelchair - immediately insisted on cooking, housework.

I prayed for deeper healings.

As summer came, paleness began to spread across her. At a check-up, what she'd thought summer allergies turned out a collapsed lung.

She began to spend time in hospital. Yet she pressed pen to notebook, intent, blue ink almost black against white of pages, approaching last chapters.

She came home, took break before tackling climax, then end.

One Sunday in mid-September she felt dizzy. She went to hospital. Next morning I went to work, as usual, to keep fragile bark afloat.

In afternoon, a call - doctor - she'd started to feel drowning - received morphine - in coma - a process'd begun - in their opinion, irreversible.

I raced up-Peninsula, to her room.

Morphine counteract - some words - but she wasn't there - gradually, words left.

She breathed, quietly - her face composed - pale and beautiful.

Next day - a Tuesday - around noon, kissed her cheek, said'd be back from lunch in an hour. I went home, ate, restorative time at piano, then

traffic on way back.

I arrived fifty minutes late.

I went to her, touched her hair, said I was back, spoke with nurse at foot of bed.

She stopped breathing.

The nurse looked at me. "She waited for you!"

I went to her, touched her face, kissed her, spoke tenderly.

I felt the whole span of our life together.

After twenty minutes, death-changes advancing.

I knew our fight for life was done.

I walked out into a world blank, foreign, and trembling.

I returned to our little apartment of seven years.

I stood amid the wreck of our hopes.

Her books were all unfinished.

We'd had no children.

I fell upon my knees.

I howled.

III. THE FRIEND

1998-Feb. 2001

Dilly: *When you've been at Beltmarsh for a little while, you'll understand what you want. It isn't me.*
Allen: *No? What is it, then?*

- *Love Letters* (Paramount Pictures, 1945)

1. Floating

September 1998 - May 1999.

My mother'd asked what I'd do if Beth died. "The old me," I'd said, "would die, and a new one would begin."

It was so.

Yet I was unborn, unborne. I lingered in interstices. I seemed alive, and the end of her suffering was a sort of liberation - but in the primary deep things I was a motor suddenly without load, suspended under dirigible balloons.

When I wasn't mourning, the world was beautiful, really new and simple, also dissolving. Yet, though nights were anxious - I'd bolt up, certain breath was stopping or organs'd come loose - would leap from bed and run about the house, blindly, to break the terror attacks - by day I faced it in innocence.

I wasn't alone. Beth and I'd had few friends - did most living between ourselves - but during the descent there'd been two strong souls.

Gwen lived in British Columbia. A moment's pass-by on the 'net had brought, in time, friendship of earlier era of honor. We spoke daily - our drive to cross-pollinate minded me of Kendrick - took planes to visit when we could. Without long daily confidings by 'net, many moments of busy-living years would've gone unrecorded.

Gabrielle lived close-by. In that last spring she and Beth'd come to care for each other deeply. We went on car-rides, and for brief times troubles weren't. After a warm day's trip to Luther Burbank's gardens in Wine Country, Beth told me if anything happened to her, Gabrielle'd be there for me, and she didn't want me to be alone. I said that untoward events weren't an option.

After, I was little more than an incarnate desire to understand. I walked down five hundred paths, one after another - and Gabrielle went with me, to each's end, all the while keeping in her hands what I'd needed to forget for a time: the thread back to the outside world.

She listened with unending patience, helped me see whole - and in

the old way of people, I reached for her, across gap. When she held me in the night, talked until dawn, I felt able to return. But I couldn't find the bridge.

We'd bonded. Her ties with Beth - she'd seen us together, knew what'd been lost - made it stronger. Yet as I came, she dispersed. She didn't leave, exactly, but neither was she passionately there.

Aspiring opera-singer, possessed of a startling rapid intuition, twenty-seven - she seemed made to be deeply responsive to life. She told me without reservation that she loved me - yet, this fading.

I could not leave - didn't want to, for I couldn't stand another death - yet I wasn't fully alive, and neither was this.

I knew not what to do.

We turned to her past, and there were likenesses to the one just gone - sensitive child in conflict with surroundings - adolescence bloomed - men to mete out same treatment - self didn't exist, body to be immobilized and used.

She'd turned inward, become deeply, complexly introverted.

I couldn't reject her.

It was maddening. Yet even anger wasn't hearty - was reflexive, reflective.

I felt myself turning pale, too.

It was in the spring of '99 I thought of Rand. I'd turned from her as from adolescent flame when I'd married. Now I was curious about others who'd received the strange touch of her mind.

I did a 'net search on her, read down the list, clicked on the first personal website.

It was in that moment that it began.

A girl's picture came on my screen - she'd broad shoulders, wide-spread cheekbones, dark straight hair, dark eyes like pools - eyes and face raised to a sphere of pure white light a few feet above her.

She didn't shrink in fear or worship. She seemed friendly to the light, anticipating, ready to rise, touch fingers to it. A sound file loaded, began

to play - a man's voice, weary, bit stuffed-nose'd: "a pin-up girl ... of the spirit."

I knew just what this was - crackly moment from old movie - Joseph Cotten - 1945. One of my favorites. Screenplay: Ayn Rand.

I clicked on the photo, and a new page invited me into the precincts of Jocelyn Berl. I accepted, and entered complexity: overflow of essays on everything from classical philosophy to anime - page upon page of photos, from Pre-Raphaelite art to bondage to flowers - enormous collection of personal journal entries, open for all to comb.

She offered direct contact on messenger system - ICQ - so I wrote *in media res* how good Cotten'd been in the whole monologue. Came back a single word: "Indeed."

Nothing more. I smiled. A challenge.

Her site provided username and location on a live-chat server, and I entered the place called *#rational* with the thought, "Jocelyn, I'm going to win your friendship."

There she was, at the list-top.

We began talking instantly, with slight-startled curiosity. She was quick, suspicious, sharp - seemed made of Christmas-tree lights and razor blades. Still, I felt us shade, through weeks, from strangers to beginning-to-be-friends.

She was the guiding spirit of a group - a few Colorado friends'd used 'net to stay in touch - it'd grown - mail list, chat rooms, personal journals - debated, analyzed one another - sought life-way of more color, romantic adventure, self-knowledge - without evading modernity.

They called themselves Citylighters - from Rand's evocations of romantic possibilities of cities lit lofty against the darkness.

And it apexed on Jocelyn: she'd started list, hosted the chat channels, journaled ceaselessly, challenged all to grow and become more.

I and Jocelyn talked inexhaustibly - didn't always agree - far from it - was not the point.

In one talk, I urged need for multi-level psychological depth. She held that happiness for male was setting a rational goal, achieving it, then repeating in series. I'd found it repellent, robotic.

Yet also provocative. I couldn't deny many males seemed so - or many

females found it alluring.

It didn't ring for me. I mused on why.

I began to remember the potential - and limitations - I'd found in Rand.

June 1999 - April 2000.

A steady visitor-rivulet wound through *#rational* and *#citylights* - drawn by her website or the spreading-word. Old regulars abided, often and long as could, and greeted new-come.

Each of the old - intense glowering presence named Mick Halvorsen - quiet steady program-code expert named Bin Nuan - boy named Taylor who came in once as I was leaving and to whom Jocelyn seemed to take a sisterly shine - and the others - was a distinct personality.

Yet, for all that, their coming-together yielded surprising, sometimes-tender camaraderie. And I - by Jocelyn's vouch, or versedness in Rand, or native aesthetic bent - was with them if not of them. To be without being submerged, to linger at point-of-interface, suited where I was.

I was eldest by years - Jocelyn was mid-twenties - and their young edges kept me from fully engaging. But the ideas batted were striking, and something valuable always took place between Jocelyn and me. She called herself post-Objectivist - took Rand's passion and aesthetics, left ideology behind.

I took inspiration from her - began keeping site of my own: began 'net journal, made pages about interests, memory-page to Beth, found long piece I'd written in '96 - *Dani* - it told story from inside - and put it up. Small offerings, to any who might find.

Nine months in, Jocelyn reminded I'd never subscribed to list. I read-and-wrote for a few days. The thought - none of it by her - seemed blocky, torpid under rapidity. Without personal contact it was pointless. I unsubscribed.

Jocelyn was divorcing her husband, moving to California with Mick - but we talked happily on ICQ of meeting once she'd moved. Knowing our friendship was becoming realer, I carefully gave reasons for leaving list.

I'd half-expected raised quills from her, but she took it easily.

After that, silence.

No letter, word from friends. The rapid-fire exchanges, synchronicities, targetings where each needed to grow - but a memory.

They read each other's journals daily - effective jungle telegraph. I investigated - she'd gone silent with all.

I revisited her site - reread essay announcing as only proper sexual paradigm male dominance, female submission. I remembered Halvorsen's brooding.

I hoped this was nothing bad.

I sent out the call every way I knew.

There was no reply.

It was bad timing.

In mid-'90s, Goosie'd moved a hundred miles south, just in from Monterey. My mother'd followed several years later. On April's first day in '00 I'd driven to Goosie's for lunch - my mother'd been late - unusual - didn't call - unheard - made my stomach tighten.

After hour-and-quarter, phone rang - she'd been found wandering, dizzy and confused, by ocean, brought in by ambulance.

We flew uphill to hospital - I walked in, looked down to her green eyes - they moved back and forth - I asked, tender, how she felt - words floated out - meaningless - held her fingers in mine - no answering touch.

Tics began spreading through her body, then all-convulsing seizures. She was in a quick-spreading electric thicket.

She'd almost lost - but medicines from doctor-minds given by nurse-hands brought her back - arrested lightning, soothed explosive pressure in her vessels.

In few days, diagnosis: brain cancer, from unsuspect lung tumor, sourced from breast tumor cut years before - she'd always laughed off, called almost-no-cancer. Tumor cut from her brain in perfect operation - radiation and chemotherapy aimed at lung tumor, and it shrank.

But it would not go.

There would be no recovering.

She sat straight in hospital bed, looked me in the eye, brightly said she'd survive five years, do all she'd put off - London and Paris again, then sail to the land whose history she'd studied for decades but never visited: Egypt.

I thought of Beth's pressing pen to paper.

I hoped my mother'd live to taste her plan-fruits, and that their juice'd be pure and strong and sweet.

May - August 2000.

Months passed. Jocelyn's site vanished.

Citylighter things began to wither.

I resigned myself to a long siege of unknowing.

Months later, I wrote Taylor to check in.

I stared at his reply.

Jocelyn was alive and well. She'd moved to California on schedule. She'd simply dropped most of her friends.

I was angry.

Memory came of Rand's high-flown ideals - and her lies to the world about her affair with young Branden.

I waved a dismissive hand.

Good riddance, I thought.

Goodbye, Citylights - goodbye, *#rational.*

2. Becalm

September - December 2000.

My life was in a bright calm.

I had goals - at work, home with Gabrielle, my mother's care - and I achieved them.

The sails of my life hung slack.

I stayed busy above and below decks.

I delved not into the past, nor raised my eyes too far into future.

It was the Horse Latitudes, and I knew it.

I waited.

In the last week of November, air began to shift.

Not enough to move me, but I felt it.

After a week, it stopped.

It left me achingly expectant.

I looked, inside and out, for the cause.

I'd made a friend in the East Bay.

Was I coming to love Ingrid?

That I did not feel.

But what?

9 December 2000.

One early afternoon, sudden light.

I *knew*.

Someone was coming.

I could feel her approach.

I went to my journal and wrote of it.

I wanted to reach my hand to the future and touch hers, but I couldn't.

So I set the words, so she'd know I'd felt it, that very hour, that very day.

At end - "Come soon, dear friend. I loved you before I knew you."
I'd a sense it'd be vast.
I was not wrong.

Several hours later, a pull to my website's guestbook.
I hadn't looked in weeks.
I glanced down.
At end, an unfamiliar entry.
I read the name.
A little tremor through me.

Greetings, I don't think that you and I ever spoke on #citylights, but it was through my interactions with that group of people (and most specifically through my boyfriend, Taylor Brandt) that I found your site. I've looked at your site before, but I have by no means explored the entirety of it. I tend to look at in-between times, and every time I look I come away with more to think about, more to learn, a feeling of expansion and joy, no matter what it was that I looked at. Thank you. -Mira Graham
Posted: Saturday, December 9th 2000 - 10:52:38am

I leaned back in my chair, in my home office.
I did not know of her.
Yet I felt her. Not recognition - hadn't been enough of the personal yet - but the action of her mind.
Fine things played through persisting light. She'd brightness, clarity, awareness of social groupings. Exact mind. Strongly differentiated. She'd understood my writing-intent. I felt abundance in her.
I hesitated. 'Net friends were flitty, and I didn't want another disappoint. But I liked her and her unique sound. She wasn't responsible for Jocelyn's perfidy.
I looked again, trying to read back into the wordless. I looked for clichés, awkwards, conventionals. There were none.
Through simplest means, a personal expression. I wondered if she was in art - seemed to have creative energy. I tried to trace her thoughts -

couldn't, was blocked somehow - so I went to intuition.

On the first level, I was to know she was there.

On next - to let her in.

Deeper - faint - beckon - come closer.

Further, I could not go.

I surfaced. Here simple enough: from Taylor, she'd learned my site. But how she wrote felt intimate - spiritual space in which boyfriend was acknowledged but not included.

And so, in my depths, without reason, I wondered if we'd be lovers.

I set it aside. My faith was good relationships shouldn't be molested. She didn't seem to be in anything less.

I cleared my conscious self and began to type.

First - her full name.

Second - she'd understood perfectly.

Third - further correspondence'd be welcome.

Last - my full name.

I hit "send."

When I told Gabrielle, that evening, she smiled.

❧

10 December 2000.

Next morning, small shock: her answer. I inhaled, cleared myself, began to read.

She was feeling bold this Sunday morning - gone with friend to church - chamber orchestra's performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* - harpsichordist, organist, two trumpeters she called marvelous. Bach did joy so well, and it'd been good to return to his mathematic precision after recent excurse to chaotic lands of rock n' roll.

(Bach - my first musical passion.)

My site'd impressed - she wanted to see what more might come of direct contact with me. With that, she confessed, boldness was at end. She pantomimed laugh at herself, declared she'd leave before embarrassing herself further, thanked for my note, and was gone.

I went to her site - a journal, poetry she'd written, favored links, profile page - to journal first - begun past September - recuperating from injury sustained while dancing -

{ *dances?* }

- been nursed through by Taylor - some entries detail-teemed - plunged one into middle of her days - sometimes short-breathed rushes of fact - then moments of wisdom in which mind and feeling'd never gone apart - unbroken, beneath the come-and-go phenomena, a steady light-mind and the expressing of it.

To poetry - less depth, still good - more obscure, involuted, darker-tinged.

To section "For the Curious" - the profile.

I turned very still.

My new-found correspondent was no scholarly *literateuse* of twenty-five - or forty - turning out eloquence in a dusty library.

She was a ballerina - on her own in Boston - journal'd mentioned roommate - train at School of the Boston Ballet - received college degree just after turning seventeen.

She'd just turned eighteen.

The first thing, after, was a memory.

I was in a darkened movie theater, Beth - companion on hundreds of screen-voyages - at my side. We were watching a documentary on a father of electronic music, Leon Theremin.

Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys was on-screen, struggling in an idea's birth. The mind guttered and smoked, but under clumped ashes the force was still there. He moved his hands and shoulders, stuttered, then rushed: "Children of God are in their twenties ... the twenty year olds, not really rapidly approaching thirty ... not quite adults, really, but - kind of flam-

boyant, a little bit whimsical." The moment passed, and I do not know if any other sitters knew the insight that'd just emerged. But Beth and I knew.

At that age, the start of standing forth, a clarity and passion come that most lives never see again. A painter once said, "Every child is a great artist - what do we do to them?"

Came memory of Jocelyn, our best talk. She'd been working on a long essay in college on the meaning and importance of the triune passion in adolescents for ideas, for romance, for the aesthetic. Of that, she'd told me impassionedly, one must never, ever let go.

I wondered at allure of sex. I felt none. There was attraction between us, energy-swell when I'd read her age - but not specified to libido. This was far from the dark and humid, as if all'd taken place in upper air.

I felt something very good about her.

I replied, and went into my day. Now and then, I wondered what would come of this.

I felt no conflict about Gabrielle. When we'd first talked relationship-philosophy, she'd denounced monogamy more forcefully than Beth ever had.

❧

11-31 December 2000.

In our letters of that month, no overt emotion, no finery - and nothing less than perfect clarity. We spoke with complete freedom about our minds and lives.

We spoke not of each other, weren't conventionally friendly. Like strangers who'd met on converging paths and walked to a vista, we looked at this, then at that: outward, what was to be seen.

Early on, she asked if she might link to my site on hers. I didn't tell how honored I was. When it was up, I looked at the adjective she'd put next: "brilliant."

Few days later, note from Taylor - his girlfriend, he'd heard, was conversing with me - was she behaving? I wrote back - unsure if friendly or territorial - asked what manner of misbehavior I might expect.

There was no answer.

Our flow continued, undisturbed.

I didn't read her every journal, past or present. I preferred to leave a variety to enjoy.

And so, only years later did I read early-November entry in which she'd spoken of one of my journals as having a transcendent beauty she wished to take into her own voice and write in during that chilly autumn night - and an entry of mid-December in which she called our letters one of the joys of her life.

I didn't know any of this.

So, when I'd written just before Christmas and - first time - no answer for days, I'd thought - day when few friends'd turned oddly silent - our thread'd snapped.

Annoyed, I deleted the directory that held our letters.

I never told her, and later, as I asked if she'd copies, lied that I'd lost them by mistake.

A few days after, she answered, clear-bright as ever.

I didn't know that her relationship'd been in serious trouble for weeks - and that during the time she'd not written, she had broken up with Taylor.

3. Breezing

1-7 January 2001.

First of the month, I'd told her I was flying to British Columbia, would be off 'net. I'd arrived on the second, stayed five days, then prepared to fly home.

After check-in, I'd walked to long plate-glass window, aluminum-framed, saw white body of idling jet on plowed tarmac.

I looked at blue sky, then turned to waiting area.

My eye fell on 'net kiosk. I walked to it, bought time, read news, letters. I wrote Gwen I'd enjoyed our visit, loved our friendship. Still driving - would never expect it. Wrote Gabrielle I couldn't wait to see her wonderful face and bright eyes.

Almost no time - wondered if I'd left anything unsaid, anywhere. And Mira came to me.

From the start, I'd kept things impersonal, at clean moderate distance. Now, I questioned. If I suddenly died, she'd never know I'd enjoyed her letters, had truly liked her.

No time to think. I took dictation from within: I wrote I was flying back, no time at all, never told her I enjoyed our contact, would be online next day.

I closed with a quality we shared.

quicksilverishly,
michael

I hit "send," got on board, and flew.

❧

8 January 2001.

Going personal carried risk. I didn't want to lose quality. As I drove into work, I was edgy - and eager.

Mira'd written - hailed my return - began life-update - been at parents' over holidays - returned same day I had - been met at Boston airport by her friend Harris - despite home's restorativeness, she'd found Colorado narrow, not supportive of joy and openness she felt in Boston.

She spoke briefly of breakup - she'd been unhappy for months - put all her energy into relationship, and ended up so far off her path it appalled her.

She'd asked family doctor to prescribe something for depression - ran in family - hadn't kicked in yet, but good doing something for her own benefit - resolved to make good life for herself in Boston, was energized at prospect.

She said Gwen reminded her of her best friend - they'd visited daily in Colorado 'til Andrea'd gone back to Oregon - Mira'd almost visited Jocelyn and Halvorsen, but with breakup hadn't had time.

Our contact'd been one of the best things in recent life. Taylor'd left her feeling small, unimportant, moreover in Boston she'd often been alone. But my enjoyment of her letters, my finding something in them, meant much - the trip home'd renewed her, but my letters'd sustained her.

She was sure I knew how hard it was to find one who consistently challenged, who inspired new thought-directions. That was what my letters did, and she loved it.

Were she modest she'd probably blush, but she'd learned from Jocelyn the all-importance of honesty.

She had to go, and hoped to hear from me soon. She closed, as she had several times before, "Hugs, Mira."

I smiled as I closed it. Being more personal hadn't ruined things, at all.

❧

9-13 January 2001.

Over the next few days, we told of our lives - not slow, not quick - just right.

She spoke of Colorado - long backyard with pond and trees, flower beds, vegetables growing - I saw them - spoke of Boston and Colorado cats - felt them - spoke suddenly of this friend or that, and they rose before

me, limelit - Andrea and she liked to touch things together - being near Andrea was like standing in sunlight.

That part of her sexually drawn to girls - I drew in breath - we'd never spoken of sex - wished she and Andrea were lovers - they worked so well on every other level - it'd be such fun.

As I mused - the women with whom I'd been deepest - Dani, Beth, Gabrielle - were bisexual - I saw Mira's passing mention of Celexa for the depression.

She told bit of romance-history: before Taylor, been Matt for a year - after split, she'd sworn to stay single for some time - within three months was dating Taylor - now swore to stay single - this time, because she was stronger, she'd keep it.

I wondered how long it would be until she loved again.

14 January 2001.

In her profile she'd mentioned her faith. I'd always thought Unitarian Universalism gentlest of all. On this day she went into detail.

She told of UU youth conferences - sometimes more than a hundred people. After rules'd been explained, small groups would form, go off, get to know each other, then undertake some assignment or discussion on a set theme, such as facades and masks, or sex and gender - they were called "touch groups."

I thought it beautiful. It was what I'd sought.

Jocelyn, who'd also abandoned her, was sending letters offering renewed fealty. They were ignored.

At letter's end - followed by colon-dash-parenthesis smile - she wrote that whyever I liked her, she was glad. She announced beginning of a "MiraEvilCampaign" to persuade me to come see her in Boston - her apartment, she wrote, had air mattress of surpassing comfort - my name all over it.

She wished me a beautiful day - expressed hope she'd hear from me soon - closed with hugs, from her to me, and signed her name.

I felt her touch.

15-16 January 2001.

Her first journal-entry in several days contained merry mention of long letter from me. As I read it, her posting it seemed of some significance. I didn't know why.

The next entry - after muse on sharp beauty of life in its complexity, completeness, chaos, and synchrony - ended on something new: "I love being alive."

Something seemed happening in her.

17 January 2001.

I began a letter shortly after midnight, told Mira I loved her beauty-of-life entry, added some of the beauties I'd seen during day-just-passed.

Each weekday I drove on Great Highway to work. That morning'd been clear light-blue-and-touch-of-yellow sky to south - ruffled light from sun rising to east - to west, beyond ocean breakers, far down-sea, fluffy cumulus clouds on lip of horizon - ocean and sky-cloud merged - everything in clear salted air just as it should be - not what'd been waited for, worked toward, or planned, but what *was.*

it can be said. it's nonsense to say it's all some mysterium that words cannot penetrate. it can be said, but not directly. there's endless more to say, so i'll end here. more before long :)

Later that day, a letter. I'd to look twice at the address.

Jocelyn asked this stay between us, but didn't expect me to do so. Then she got down to business.

"Mira. Lovely, sweet, charming, girl. Not woman. Girl."

I knew this, she said - asked me to remember - hold Mira's hand as brother, nothing more, in her transition from child to adult. In years to

come, things might change, but for now, "from one soul to another," I should respect "her current levels" as the gentleman she knew I could be.

She closed "with tenderness," her name - and postscript that no reply was necessary.

I looked at it and felt my temper rise.

"Nine months," I thought.

In dangerous amusement, by return note I made it clear Mira wasn't to be discussed.

Jocelyn said nothing more.

For the rest of the day, my temper bled into everything.

I was less careful.

18 January 2001.

I walked into work in anticipation.

A letter from Mira, longest yet.

She'd loved my description of driving, answered with evocation of quiet pajama'd mornings in Boston. Those'd change, though, with job, landed just day before, at college bookstore. She was excited by prospect of even more activity, meeting new people, extra cash - which, saved, would help with all the traveling she'd be doing in the next year to find dancing job.

She spoke of strange power of dreams, remarked notable side-effect of Celexa was remembering dreams again. Two years before, she'd had most powerful of her life: she was Death, fallen in love with mortal girl who'd little time to live. In aftermath, Mira'd made it a novella, and though it needed work she deemed it best thing she'd ever written.

She'd read my letter just before rushing off to ballet class - praised it as a beautiful thing to receive in early morning. All day she'd wondered how to reply, but when she'd actually sat down it'd been easy and just flowed out.

And though she'd to write journal, finish viewing movie and sewing pair of pointe shoes, then get out of house quickly as possible, she wondered if I'd computer chat program so she could talk to me sometime. She gave contacts on ICQ and AIM, offered also to chase down cash, or get a calling

card, or use Dialpad if by chance I wanted to talk voice. (She'd told that, as her and roommate's budget was hair-thin, she'd no long-distance access.)

She advised she'd be on 'net less and less, for new job began in few days, so if she took a bit longer to write her replies to please bear that in mind.

She closed with hugs and wishes for more beautiful dreams, and signed her name.

I finished in hilarity. Nothing stood in the way. I wrote at once, told of Jocelyn's advice, mocked mother-hen pose, told Mira she knew things Jocelyn never would. I closed saying once I'd sent I was going on ICQ or AIM to find her.

As I brought up ICQ - very program, on very computer, on which I'd had my best talks with Jocelyn - our past five weeks came, solemn-joyful, to the fore.

I added her, not knowing if she was still home, not knowing how long I'd have to wait.

She added me back, near-instantly.

She was there.

I took a breath, and brought fingers to the keyboard.

❧

We greeted one another, admitted to smiling.

She was happy - had my letter - one from Andrea - talk with second-oldest Citylighter (irascible critic, about thirty, named James Roque) - now talk with me - and night before in her bed "a warm body."

I felt surprise, slight arousal, jealousy-flash.

Warm bodies wonderful, I wrote, hoped this'd as-warm soul. Very warm, she said - not always good at letting others see. I exhaled. She wasn't stony about sex.

He was better at showing it to her than to others - made her happy - loved exploring people's unplumbed depths.

It reached my stomach, then spread - trickle of desire overflowed a low internal wall - wondered what she'd be like as a lover, find in my depths - told her that'd opened door for me - couldn't discern what was inside,

but it was open.

She was strongly people-centric, she continued - even when indicting some for mundanity, found them fascinating, deep, beautiful - so she liked coming to know and understand them.

She asked why I was smiling.

I sat up little straighter - with slight sense-of-risk, told: filled with our starting to interact - nothing else much existed - was answering phone and handling duties with greatest rapidity to get back - asked her how that suited - long pause - felt slight nerves - she said it did nicely, confessed to being awfully smiley.

Vapor of dangerous humor rode up on happiness' tail - I wanted to push boundaries - affected innocence, asked why so smiley - she called me silly - was certainly not her poor cat, who'd just gone into heat, or her cold apartment in Boston winter - it was I.

I denied the possibility, called myself good Objectivist, stuck to facts strictly.

Why, then, did she get the feeling I could be as wacky and Puck-like as her friend Palo if I so pleased? He, it seemed, was a traveling jewelry salesman, inveterate punster, given to sending people on treasure hunts to locate him when he appeared on surprise visits - "quasi-believed" in faerie, as Mira herself did - she believed, too, in dark power of owls in woods - and he'd taught her and her parents how to play hearts when he'd recently come to visit.

This felt like playful mutual joy.

She suddenly broke in with pantomimed poke and tickle. I knew directly were going to become flirtatious - I pantomimed elbow-nudge, declared tickle fight could be brutal - no prisoners, I warned - she bragged she always won, then admitted more like almost always - I said she was arousing my competitive fires - she laughed, declared she'd still win - I punned on beating her well, emerging victorious, victory'd be mine - she asked when I was coming, so she might hone skills.

"Soon - soon," I said, smiling.

"Alright then," said she.

It was as simple as that.

Shortly after, she fell quiet - I asked how she was, said I wasn't pull-

ing Jocelyn-waif routine but we'd just talked intensely - she was fine, had turned bit contemplative, but intensity didn't scare her - what scared her was apathy.

Sometime, I said, I'd tell how I'd grown in intensity, how aversion to was one of my biggest social dissatisfies - she replied, briefly indicating interest - fell silent once again - I pantomimed looking for her on far horizon - she wrote instantly - yes, she'd become distracted talking to too many people at once - focused on one another afresh - talked through morning until she'd to go forth and dance.

I felt lighter on my feet, rest of the day.

19 January 2001.

I walked into work the next morning, curiosity in my veins.

A letter awaited - glanced reflexively at time-header - she'd been up late.

Boys, she'd concluded, were trouble - she'd just told the unnamed warm body "let's just be friends" - he'd reacted badly - this meant no more cuddles, no more touch for a while.

{ *did you feel it too?* }

In other news, she'd had very good ballet class despite problems with turning - months of turn-problems, actually - silly, since in summer they'd been fantastic - things seemed to be improving, though, and she was having fun in class.

The joy from talking'd bled over into class. It'd made concentrating easier, so that she hadn't just gone through the motions, but truly danced.

{ *you felt it* }

She'd spent rest of evening listening to music with Harris and her friend Hank, who'd fantastic sound system in miniscule space - they'd listened to Bach, Tchaikovsky, Copland, Vivaldi, Apocalyptica, Tori Amos, Dar Wil-

liams, Indigo Girls, Nine Inch Nails, Handel, and very many others.

"Do you know Dar Williams, Michael Dear? And do you know Gorecki's *Third Symphony*?"

She'd class in morning, otherwise'd have written pages upon pages more - hoped I'd beautiful dreams and she'd get to talk to me soon.

I looked at what she'd called me, for a long time.

The girl who'd closed with hugs and her name didn't know that a few days before, on a drive into darkening evening, I'd spoken of her to Gabrielle.

I'd shown letters as they'd gone or come, told how everything'd felt, but now, as we'd passed San Francisco's airport - dusk-light from over Pacific, land about us dark, Gabrielle's pale attentive face turned to me - I told Mira's world: on her own in Boston, active, attending the School, focused determinedly on career in dance, free of dating miasmas, love of beauty - her views on Jocelyn, her values, how good it all felt.

I finished. Eucalyptus trees passed in their glooms against still-bright sky. The car went into a banked curve. Gabrielle looked out the window, then back, smiling. White lines of headstones in Veterans' Cemetery wheeled behind her as she spoke.

"You know, if you were in love with her - I think that'd be completely wonderful. I wouldn't feel any jealousy at all. She's got her own life, she's really *on it*, she brings lots of good things to you - she's a totally positive thing in your life!"

A thrill moved along my shoulders and chest up into my head. Mira and I in love?

"You really feel that?" I said.

She said yes, that she knew it could be: from how I talked about her, from how Mira and I spoke to one another, from how I *was*.

We rode over toward sea, then by shore to home. We talked of it, held hands, fingers curling, until we got out of the car in front of our apartment-building.

But she would know, this day. For she hailed me on ICQ, soon as I signed on that morning from work.

"Michael..." she said, "come and play with me..."

I asked where she wished - flowering meadows of daffodil and asphodel? or a city at night, with street lights above dark streets? Flowering meadows, she said. She wanted sunshine.

She produced some of her own.

Mira: -gives you a great big good morning hug-
Michael: -curls his arms around you and holds you close-

She declared I'd to come see her that summer amid Colorado's mountains she missed in the East.

We spoke of Wilde - she'd first read *The Importance of Being Earnest* at thirteen, almost fell off chair laughing - of imaginary friends, whom she called self-manifestations - she mentioned Jocelyn'd sent a warning-letter to Harris, too.

Spoke of music - she said we'd to take over one of the studio pianos at the School - told her she'd to come to California - see Wine Country, the Water Temple, cliffs at Davenport - she would, just as soon as she'd saved the money.

We began to speak of love-experiences - I told of Gabrielle's singing, her passionate Italian-Armenian blood, her beauty - tumult of our early days, discomfort - and growth - of pushing buttons. Mira said, yes, "jealous" was word she sought - wished she'd a connection like that.

She told of Matt, who'd been comfort - Taylor, with whom there'd been spark and passion but not of healthy kind - a boy named Nick who'd feral connection to nature, probably her healthiest relationship of all.

She wished to change subject but didn't know to what. Had I any suggestions?

Because it was about our new friendship, I said, and shed light on my lover, she might like to hear of a recent talk.

She invited me to go ahead.

As I began, I knew this would decide the future.

She sent nothing but brief indications of listening - "very attentively, I

might add."

I was done.

She pantomimed a sigh. She was glad - didn't want Gabrielle to feel jealous - called me a big spirit - expressed harmony and comfort at non-exclusivity - had decried society's ideas of love to a friend just a few days before - how was one supposed to get all one needed from one person? - how foolish, thinking love a finite thing, only given to one person at a time - love was large, she said, compassed so much, no matter what kind it might be.

Spread wide one's mind and heart, I said - inspire others to do the same. "Exactly," said Mira, smiling.

Mira: And now, dearest, I must go into town and dance.

I thanked her for another happy day. She expressed gratitude for the same.

She went, and I sat there, looking at what she'd called me.

We talked that evening of favorite fictional characters: I spoke of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* - she, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* trilogy. We spoke of imaginary friends, of ghosts - she told in detail of the ghost Michael in the Colorado house.

Later, of music.

She wanted to hear me play sometime. I mentioned I'd a phone by the piano.

She sent a string of digits and logged off.

I walked down the hallway, to Gabrielle's office, to tell - she smiled, wished luck. I went back, closed door, sat at piano, took a breath, and dialed.

A voice - medium-pitched, clear and intense, quiet - said "Hello."

I said nothing. I set it on floor - brought fingers to the keys - thought of the ghost and her telling - began to improvise in F# major.

When I was done, I let a few beats of silence go by.

I put it to my lips.

"Hello, Mira."

"Oh Michael - hello!"

We began to speak.

All that'd been in our writing was there, and more. I remember not a word of what we said.

But it flowed and sang.

4. Turning

20 January 2001.

My mother'd always gripped life tightly. She'd left hospital in April '00, - not to her high-shouldered rose-garden house in the hills, but Goosie's ranch house by the river in the valley.

Now the hill-house was to sell, and Gabrielle and I were assigned to rent a truck, drive down Coast Highway, load sofas, televisions, computer, other of my mother's worldly goods, take them to San Francisco for our own.

My mother'd been determinedly upbeat - talked of moving out of Goosie's, buying condo in the valley, driving again when seizures'd gone.

But I felt that truckload would be the first installment of my inheritance, delivered not far in advance.

So the friend-gift shone especially bright.

21 January 2001.

As we lurched onto Great Highway, Gabrielle's face tightened. She asked what I thought was happening between Mira and me.

I looked - Pacific surf behind her - said I felt myself coming completely alive, a living whole to my toes - no idea where it was going, but right now friendship like no other - a stream running both ways, open and fresh - assured her it hadn't harmed my feelings for her - in its balancing some of our clashes, I actually felt closer.

Some worry stayed. As we reached Coast Highway and began great Pacifica descent, I told her nothing'd happen without her full and free consent. She need only say no, and what she didn't wish to happen - would not happen.

She eased all the way, then.

A few hours later we were visiting with my mother. She hobbled stiff-legged, hair cropped, smiling brightly, forgetting stray details but warmly grounded at last.

She insisted on making lunch - at table Goosie held forth - defending, then challenging, the status quo - willful and mercurial as ever.

After lunch, Gabrielle and I drove up to house - locked, unoccupied going on a year - wrestled the truck full.

Driving back we spoke of non-exclusivity, of my and Mira's possibilities, and stayed easy. Small winds pushed, and I thought of things - of life's passingness, of my family, of Beth, of Gabrielle by my side, of a girl in Boston far away.

That night, hauling-up done, I looked at Mira's journal - entry of day before - wrote of joy of great music, sensuality of hot baths, beauty of her favorite E.E. Cummings poem - and at the end, addressed me directly.

"Michael: My moments of contact with you are thrilling and rich. What adventure are we going to go on next?"

On ICQ, more, to me alone, through day - earliest a note saying she was bursting with energy - hoped we could talk - on the phone, if I pleased - didn't want to be a pest, however, so tell her buzz off if I liked - later, sad we'd not talked - but it was alright - warned she'd sent letter she called mildly paranoid - signed off with hugs and a "bye..." that sounded distinctly morose.

The letter began with a quote, asked if I could guess what she'd been reading. She pantomimed a smile.

Of course I can, goof. It's only a book I published. You've been nosing around my site.

She told of buying music (including Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* - my first classical record and she wanted to hear it) and possibly doing some singing - did Gabrielle have suggestions for her?

Then, she said, had a secret little Mira-neurosis to confess - was, for various reasons, terrified she was making pest of herself - didn't want me to think her unhealthily obsessed or big intruder - if I felt any such, I was

to tell her to go off and calm down a bit, and she would - it was just she'd spent the eighteenth and nineteenth completely energized by our talks - she called herself greedy, often-lonely, so part of her reached out to our contact - she'd plenty of people to play with, to watch movies with, to go to dinner, and such - but very few who excited and inspired her as did I, at least there in Boston - all she wanted from me was friendship, so if in any way she was jeopardizing that I was to "please please" tell her.

She mentioned the job began next day - told of coming week (included premiere of a choreography she'd done) - sent hello to Gabrielle, mentioned she'd love to talk with her, too, sometime - as ever, were the words: "Hugs, Mira."

I smiled, shaking my head.

22 January 2001.

In a letter from work, I told Mira how wonderfully misplaced her fears were, how I wanted her closer, not further.

On ICQ, when she got on, as though we'd never stopped. I asked after her knowledge of Horowitz, sent clip - him improvising in Italy. I called, to hear her hearing.

We shared music and affection until she'd to go. We parted in happiness.

23 January 2001.

Gabrielle'd felt it was time they'd contact in their own right, so while I worked she sent me bits of the letter as she composed.

Under title "New Friends," she cheered Mira's arrival and its effect.

There is this tender rosy glow about his energy that is unlike anything I've seen in him before. I think he is truly happy for the first time since I have known him.

Mira's poems made her think of me - she felt kinship with Mira in

their mutual interest in faerie, magick, Goddess - closed with hope they'd talk more soon.

She told me she'd found Mira's poetry amazing, especially in precocity.

Gabrielle: what is inside this person??
Gabrielle: her poems...there's a certain fluid balance to them, a wholeness of perception that is like you.

I answered I felt it too, that Mira seemed drawn to coupling the aspirational with the concrete.

Home, I told Gabrielle how good her letter'd felt. She agreed. As I looked in her eyes I noticed an unusual shine. The usual veil between her and life seemed ripped.

I asked what she was feeling.

"I don't - know! I feel a connection with Mira, too. I don't know if it's through you or it's just her and me, but there's something there."

Veils, it seemed, were falling all over.

When Mira and I met on ICQ, later, it was different.

Perhaps it was the letter, or knowing each other better, or other things too - but we were closer, our colors sharper, deeper - we were laughingly, weightlessly flirty.

I wondered aloud what music to send if she felt - receptive - she pantomimed large smile, declared she couldn't imagine turning down much of anything from me, particularly music.

I said I was working on travel plans.

Mira: -shy- Do you want to come and watch some of my classes while you are here?
Michael: that would be beautiful :)

We spoke of meeting - noticed we kept making date, time earlier - and then to phone, talked for over an hour.

Whether were humorous, soft, or serious, through our times light-spirit happiness threaded itself.

24 January 2001.

Next morning, to my site's guestbook - checked every few days, now. There was a new entry, from a Catherine.

Salutations. I've never told you, but I love the poignancy that saturates your words. -C
Posted: Wednesday, January 24th 2001 - 01:38:53am

I remembered - Citylighter, close acquaintance of Mira's - they'd never met, but talked - lay on phone, at night, describe surroundings in ornate glitter detail, share impressions of the days.

Mira wrote Gabrielle that morning. I'd wanted them to speak independently, so'd asked Gabrielle to save letters and possible chats, but show me none.

To me, Gabrielle praised Mira's forthright, considerate ways - teased her close of "Hugs? if I may?" wasn't so bad, either - but, she said, truly a friendship was developing well.

I looked across this good land, saw nought amiss, inland or at shore. We seemed animated by will to do well by one another - it, and goodness it brought, was palpable.

I came home with a surprise for Mira. When she greeted me, I fired off a date and time, no other words. She gasped.

We were to meet at the airport known as BOS. She was shocked, delighted - just as I'd wanted.

Once our exclaiming'd died down, we continued the never-ending converse.

Mira'd seen my site's photos. I knew nought of her looks, didn't want until we met - just for fun. Now she ribbed me: Gabrielle'd guessed, dead-on - I was forbidden to cheat, for she was liking being mysterious far too much.

If she wished to think herself so, I said, I'd not disabuse - she asked what, then - more transparent, I said - she conceded was true - "Good grrl," I said, teasing - she shouted not to "good grrl" her, pantomimed indignance.

Mira: I'm not little Jocelyn submissive, silly boy!
Michael: methinks the grrl doth protest too much!

She admitted pose was mock. I laughed to myself, that we could be thus.

I excused myself to call Gwen - she'd a question. In college had majored in fluid engineering - loved field, had exceptional ability, but was unconfident - held tangential job: marine insurance underwriting, essentially clerk-level.

She asked what I thought she was capable of.

I told: could rise high doing what she'd passion for. World needed fewer lights under bushels.

She thanked, said it'd stirred for some reason - would let me know more as she felt it out. We said goodnight.

I was hungry - when back on ICQ said was taking Gabrielle out for sushi at "26's" - downhill then off on Clement. It was Mira's sleep-time anyway, so I pantomimed taking her in my arms, wished her goodnight. She asked to ask one quick question.

Mira: -shy- would you be comfortable with us sleeping in the same bed when you come to visit?
Mira: I want to be able to touch you in my sleep...
Michael: yes, i would :)
Michael: au revoir

I logged off hastily, stood, walked to hallway closet. I was agitated.

We'd grown more flirty, tactile, and it felt wonderful - but lovers end more quickly than friends, in uglier ways.

I didn't want this to end - but didn't want to neglect an unprecedented possibility.

So, then, middle path - natural, not reckless, not safe. Stay in touch with connection - find what *it* wants - it'll show where, when, how little, how much.

I put on overcoat, turned - Gabrielle by door, smiling - walked down steps, through gatework to sidewalk.

As I turned left, downhill, wondered what being with Mira in the flesh'd be like.

Gabrielle and I walked back in and split to our offices. I went to desk, brought up Mira's journal - from sense of expectation.

There was new entry: "Peaks and Valleys." I noticed she'd called the page "peaks.html."

She wrote of meeting homeless man, on the trolley - he'd begged for help, pleaded not to be left out in cold all night - couldn't have gotten his wheelchair up her stairs - couldn't help him in any way - it'd made her feel utterly impotent.

Started job - boring but tolerable, offered likeable co-workers, huge book-discount - best class in months that morning - everything'd just flowed, even formerly-troublesome turns - she'd been wonderfully exhausted after, and on way home she'd wished someone waiting with hugs and touches.

But most glorious thing of all, she wrote, was her budding friendship with one - I saw my full name.

We'd been writing about six weeks, and'd just started talking by voice and chat past week. Every moment of contact'd been incredible, vivid, deep. Thoughts, emotions contacted with lightning rapidity, rang out like small silver bells. I'd played piano for her - she'd reclined, absorbed; when my voice'd come, it'd been just as it should.

She'd known exchange like this before, meeting of passions and souls,

but never so deep so fast. No matter what future - if a friendship forever or a "bright, brief, comet-like bit," though she prayed not - she'd be grateful forever for the experience of being able to share like this, completely, to reach this new emotional depth.

I tingled. She knew the purity, and she'd told the world.

All wasn't perfect. Seeing an end - especially at our start - annoyed me. Odd passivity, as if it'd just happen. Picture of our contact was beautiful - and exaggerated.

Yet she'd gotten the feeling, the underlying pulse, so right.

I read again, smiled at flamboyant boldness, imagined more ruckus from the Citylighters.

The dangerous amusement returned.

I began to write in my journal.

25 January 2001.

I finished a little past midnight.

I uploaded it on dedicated 'net line - thought of her reading, morning - worried briefly it was too much - but her entry'd left no doubt she felt it, too.

I read my words again, lingered at end.

I will not turn from her - nor do I think will she, from me. We will see it through, to all the places that it and we lead.
May it be endless!
I wrote, upon a time, "Come soon, dear friend. I loved you before I knew you."
And you did come, that very day.
Now that you have, I love you, Mira, all the more.

Gabrielle was in her office, researching opera history on dial-up. I walked in, showed her Mira's entry, then mine.

Her eyes shone. She hugged me, we kissed and, soon after, pulled one another into bed.

Work's morning had much not Mira - nothing that was. I knew eyes were reading, notes being sent, phones possibly being dialed - but from her, silence.

That afternoon, sudden, on ICQ - something very bad'd happened - could I call? I did, instantly.

Her voice was hoarse - been crying - ballet evaluation earlier that day - gone terribly - her two principal teachers'd been dissatisfied with outward hip rotation - less so with several other areas - without improving, not continue in Intensive - real dancers' training-ground - worst of all, they'd said that in their estimation she'd little to no chance of making it as professional dancer.

I asked her to walk me through - what was hip rotation? why important? did she think them right? why hadn't they notified before now?

I said we'd work on together. I'd research nutritional approaches to increasing flexibility. She'd appeal the decision, work out plan to break through problem areas.

We worked well together - turned directly to facts, action - could feel unhappiness lift from her shoulders - told her she'd win through, and if I could help, it'd be my pleasure.

She rallied in strength and cheer. A few minutes later we bade goodbye.

I reflected, turning to work, that hearing her strength and return to hope was one of the best gifts the world'd ever sent me.

26 January 2001.

The next day, she was upbeat, bright. We talked for an exceptionally long time. Andrea was urging her to be more sexual, unabashedly colorful - we segued into erotic movies - she named *The Pillow Book, Sirens, Kama Sutra,*

and *Queen Margot* as favorites. I was musing on opulent focus on women, certain sensory innocence to it all, when Mira said perhaps we'd watch *Queen Margot* together in Boston.

My heart began to beat a little faster. My arms tingled. This sudden skirt of the erotic-edge - after nothing, all this time - was delicious.

I asked if her heart ever went faster from all this.

Yes, she said, every day - was curious, anticipatory, nervous about what physical interaction was going to be like. It was all so amorphous, and she wanted to touch me so badly, all the time, an overwhelming urge. When I was there was going to be worse.

I was riveted to her words. She'd never spoken to me like this, never hinted at such things.

Emotional heat rose. I focused away from it, said that as we'd walked to sushi, night before, Gabrielle'd asked how things felt with Mira, and I'd used the very word: "amorphous." Mira said she didn't want to come between Gabrielle and me in any way.

I reassured her, noticing voicemail light on my desk phone was flashing. I dialed in - was Gabrielle in silly sing-song: "I know what Mira loo-oo-ks like, I know what Mira loo-oo-ks like." I hung up, wondering what this was about, smiling at the two of them.

Mira asked if I ever thought where all this was going.

Yes, I said. Not much, not pondery - was seeking natural path, and we'd not even met yet - it had, I said, potential to go staggeringly far, in my opinion, and I believed she felt that possibility too.

She pantomimed a nod.

Michael: if you mean, in part, have i thought of our becoming lovers - in every sense?
Michael: yes, i have

It was a great whirling field of possibility, I said, and I was less wanting to steer it than for us to swim in and find the best path for all - her, me, Gabrielle, the people in Mira's life - open, neither imposing on it nor being passive. It was heightened life, and I used that as guide.

I told her it was her turn now.

She'd asked because she wanted everything on the table. She believed in total honesty, and it was important to know how far I might be willing to take this. She didn't want to control or define it, because by defining things you sometimes limit them.

Mira: And you and I are limitless, Michael.

I pantomimed a smile and nod. My heart began to pound. We, she continued, had a limitless capacity for expansion, and anything less than exploring it to the utmost would be a tragedy.

I said my heart rate'd just spiked further.

She knew me, she said. She knew how she felt when we talked. Her entire life-experience made sense in a new way because of me, and the little taste we'd had so far'd opened her up so entirely, and she wanted more. Even the little things in life had a new shine, and what'd happened at ballet school was easier, and she was stronger, because of contact with me.

I was nearly overcome. All I could say was it was exactly the same for me.

If we did become lovers, she continued, it'd be difficult in ways - not only because of Gabrielle, and because I was so much older, and I'd a life in San Francisco, she one in Boston.

Mira: But I know...I know that you are the kind of man I should like to be with.

For she knew, she said, my passion for life, my artistry, my compassion "the drive to self-knowledge - the sensual nature."

I closed my eyes, breathed in a quiet breath - realized my entire body was lightly shaking.

The sails were filling.

She saw these things and her whole self said yes, it was so very much what she'd been waiting for. It made her want to be bigger, to know more, for she'd found another person, one of the very few, who could see the beauty we're all surrounded by, who worshipped life in all its complexity and who wanted to make what is here better.

So, she said, if the road of love in the more romantic sense was our wish, so be it. She was ready for it, and welcomed it. She wanted me in her life, in whatever capacity we could be together.

I told that my face was burning.

"Why, dearest?" asked Mira.

Because of her, I said. Because of us, what'd come this day. It'd been known, I said, but between lines until now. Yes, she said, it was time for it to be spoken. And so we had.

A little later, Mira exclaimed she'd gotten happy letter from Gabrielle, pantomimed big sigh of relief. "This," she said, "is going to work...somehow, this is going to work."

A one-line note I received from Gabrielle only added.

I have a picture of Mira on my desktop at work :)

I wondered what they were up to. There seemed almost-romantic playfulness. They'd each known attraction to women. Was the closeness that'd sprung up between Mira and me going to wrap Gabrielle up, too?

That, surely, would be the best of all possible worlds.

Mira and I'd taken respite from chatting. After several hours she returned, said Roque'd phoned to relay some of his and Jocelyn's growing concerns.

Jocelyn was, he'd said, flipping out - wanted to protect Mira - Jocelyn's husband'd been older, and she saw me as flying in as rescuer and caretaker to make Mira into a kept woman - pattern, Jocelyn'd said ominously, with me: saving helpless women in hard situations.

{ *idiot - beth or gabrielle could eat you for a snack* }

Roque's own comments'd been more balanced - be careful - eyes always open - not let self be snared - she was an incredible catch - wasn't to be anyone's trophy - she'd answered she wanted me in her life - was willing

to accept possibility she could get hurt.

I turned still. Inside me, voice said, "If anyone's hurt, it won't be she."

Day before, I'd sent Andrea a greeting-note at Mira's behest. Unanswered. Now I asked what Andrea thought of all this. Protective, Mira said - Mira to see all me, not be word-seduced, but in general way happy for us.

We'd had idyllic begin, precious time only ours. Now, in sight of others, negativity accrued, texture thicked. It came of violating the folkways. This was why people kept secrets.

One part of her, she said, kept in mind I could be crazy stalker out to seduce. She trusted, but'd be stupid not to bear in mind.

I said I loved her strength, clean independence, no wish for trophies. She knew that, she said, and was glad for all of that.

Mira: But I am a pretty girl...and I have been at danger of being a trophy before.

"You're understating, then," I said in my mind. "Pretty girls aren't trophies - beautiful ones are. Are you outward-beautiful, too?"

{ *she is* }

I agreed with her taking all precaution - offered home, work data to send to friends, mother. She thanked - had to go into town, had said so some time before - and departed.

I walked into my thoughts, frowning. People were watching. They'd make most of the least. She might be affected, might come to agree. From start I'd felt her clear sight and liked it. Obscure judgments from negative-biased persons made me nervous.

Reich'd said blackmail only works when one's done wrong in own-eyes. He who lives in openness is strong and free.

I returned to the truth, the only thing in this that mattered: Mira wanted me.

I felt nervous, exhilarated, and proud.

There's a phrase in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Oliver is caught in an emotion, and rather than pressing it back or avoidantly getting busy he "waits for the turn."

I'd come home, and vitality'd disappeared. Heaviness'd spread. I didn't know why - irk at Andrea? anger at Jocelyn? couldn't the world leave us be?

I waited, for the turn.

(How often do we not wait. We want to *do* something, make it go, make it go away. So we never learn the fine structure of emotional experiences.)

Gabrielle came home - I told - we decided walk to Royal Ground Coffee - down traffic-busy Geary, past lit sushi places - each to own thoughts, quiet, tentative - entered - crossed plank-floor to broad chairs, dark old-wood table - talked of Zen and halting over-thinking - Buddhist master she'd known'd said to objectify thoughts, observe them from distance, uninvolved - "Big trouble!" I said quickly.

We talked more - I asserted we must enter, deeply as we can, to come out the other side.

We walked into cold-fog night, rambled down past Clement - after about dozen blocks we were before gate - walked upstairs and without word went into bedroom - we lay down and hugged closely.

Street-light came in - Gabrielle's face was dim oval of pale skin and darker ovals of eyes, her lips and chin slants in half-dark - she was more a feeling on my skin, arms and legs entangled, both of us silent.

We lay there.

Time slowed, then began in new direction. Air lightened. Weight went.

Change. Opening between us.

I felt great clarity.

She began to talk, quietly, of how I'd been since Mira'd come. Something great was here, she said, I'd been seeking it, something totally new and different. She sounded prophetic.

We talked of forms it might take, from chastest to most erotic-romantic.

She was well with all.

I could feel this wasn't yet complete.

I looked into her eyes.

"Remember - you can have your own relationships too. I want it to be good for you. Physically safe, first, then medically safe, then the best possible for you - sexually, emotionally, whatever else comes of it - how could I not want that for you, if it's something you wanted?"

Deeper stillness. She spoke, in a voice newer yet, quiet. "I could, couldn't I ..."

"Of course."

She smiled, started to grin. And then we were talking about the relationships she, too, could have.

We stayed up very late, limbed close. At some imperceptible point, we went into sleep.

27 January 2001.

It was there when we woke. Simple radiance.

Early that afternoon I told Mira. She was glad, yet seemed brief, neutral. I said I was pretty good at feeling tone-shifts, said it seemed Andrea's warnings'd hit home.

Yes, she said, to an extent. In past romances she'd ignored early signs. Andrea said she judged people by words, not as wholes. Between that and Roque's warnings, she suddenly felt she'd to act grown-up, careful.

It was silly though, she said - really did think it safe and right to simply be with me.

Mira: our relationship has no use for ages, age is just scratching on the surface, it's not important.

Don't act, I said. If she felt adult, be so - a child, the same. Why not?

Her brain, she answered, telling her to be commonsensical, cautious. Sensible caution, I said: eyes open, heed signals, keep critical mind - benevolently - I did it with her, too - real problem was the "had to." That had to go.

Given this, I asked, did she still wish to meet? "Of course," she bellowed - I'd better not *dare* not come. I said that, for record, my visit was *sans* obligation: wasn't obliged to like, love, touch. She knew, she said.

Mira: I wouldn't even have suggested you sleeping in my bed if I didn't think you were a man of honor and of principle.

I asked if Andrea knew about bed. Mira hadn't told, but Andrea knew her and probably'd figured it. She pantomimed a wink. I laughed.

As always, joy won out.

That night we talked on the phone for five hours - stream of color, play, fact, and warmth.

It was late when we said goodbye, hugged in words, said we wished them real. I got into bed with Gabrielle and passed quickly into quiet sleep.

28 January 2001.

A perfect day for Davenport. I'd activated ICQ, to send Mira a note I'd be back, evening - instant I online she wrote, said for me to check mail.

Her letter, just-sent, was of a half-hour's talk she'd just had with her mother about us.

Mira'd said she wanted it "not to sputter out but be strong and burn for a long time" - we'd discussed romance - Gabrielle was in my life - I was keeping Gabrielle informed of all - my visit was without strings, obligations - I was sending contact info - her mother'd interrupted to say heart rate and blood pressure'd just dropped significantly - Mira pantomimed a smile - we'd agreed if she felt uncomfortable in any way I'd be happy to get hotel - her mother'd burst in, "But that won't happen! You need to share your life with him." - Mira'd told about Beth, my encouraging Mira to be herself in all ways, my help through ballet-problems. Her mother'd responded - glad I was in Mira's life - perhaps a welcome

distraction from troubles with dance - be easier on her if I were ten years younger, for I sounded too perfect, but I wouldn't be same person then, and she knew that - could hardly wait for me to see Mira dance, because that'd help me understand a huge part of her.

Mira's mind was brimming - her mother was somehow at peace, as if Gabrielle's deeper ease'd transferred - talk'd been fantastic, far easier than she'd expected - "pretty much told everything" - loved beyond all else that she could have it with me - and share joy she took in it.

She was off to a long hot shower, then wander to Museum of Fine Arts. She closed, "With an overflowingness of hugs - Mira."

I returned to ICQ, exclaimed happily. We celebrated, called day beautiful already, then parted.

Gabrielle and I stepped into sun, turned, walked uphill to car, then drove to sea in bright light and clean air.

A few days before, I'd told Mira of Myers-Briggs personality types. That evening I'd see a few minutes after my departure she'd revealed she'd just taken the test.

Of sixteen types, she'd come out Champion Idealist.

Just like me.

Returned, on ICQ I told Mira of day - she told of her and friend Don's dinner of steak, rice, sautéed mushrooms, salad - said we'd have great fun cooking in Boston - said she was finally chatting with Gabrielle.

Mira: She feels so warm, Michael!!

At that moment, Gabrielle wrote me from two rooms down the hallway.

Gabrielle: it makes me totally high to interact with her
Gabrielle: there is some connection here...
Gabrielle: my heart is pounding and I'm dizzy, and I'm unexplainably joyful and touched!

I wrote Gabrielle my heart was ready to burst.

Gabrielle: what is this??

An amazing thing, I said. I pantomimed a smile. I told Mira this felt very extraordinarily right. She yelled she knew it, wanted to talk to Gabrielle on phone right away.

I called out to Gabrielle to disconnect the dial-up. Then we were all on the phone, smiling, laughing.

In the hour that followed, among us - compatriots, friends of future, of past - there wasn't a moment of erotic, no trace of flirt - and not a second without joy in each other's being.

29 January 2001.

That morning, letter from Mira - I opened it, noticed my and Gabrielle's addresses. She greeted us both.

She wrote of early light on building-sides - colors of gold and rose - big oak across street - silence in house - cat's purr, refrigerator's hum - honey in morning tea, subtle sweet texture-layer added to deeper flavors of Ceylon - even, she wrote, tedious mundane things'd taken on warm glow of satisfaction and joy.

She'd dreamed of rooks, ravens perched on an oak - giant gust'd risen as if to blow them away, but they'd held on, not even flapped, though tree'd swayed violently. Upon waking, she'd remembered that in Native American traditions, "ravens are the bringers and keepers of magick."

She drew her own conclusions from this. She pantomimed a smile. She'd to go ready herself for the wider world.

But I just wanted to say, before I go, that I know that the glow in my body is not just from the sunlight alone.
Thank you above all measure for the beauty of last night.

She closed "With all my love and many, many hugs - Mira."

That evening, Mira and I talked with ease. We'd reached plateau of easy-breathing closeness.

At one point, she saw us on couch somewhere, or her bed, looking at each other - her taking big sigh, leaning back against me, listening to my heart - she called it lovely picture, said she seemed touch-crazy this day.

We went to phone - words and breaths and emotions deeper yet.

Each day, it happened.

30 January 2001.

The new job was affecting her schedule. We were starting a little later, talking a bit less.

That evening, told I'd talked to Catherine earlier, first time - called her likeable, tender inside, intelligent, spines around heart like prickly-pear.

Our subsequent humorous banter led to scenario in which we wound up lassoed together, pressed tight. Mira delightedly cursed me, said it made her melt.

Pleasure warmed me.

We weren't just kidding now. It was exciting, suggestive, her reaction most of all - but we'd never gone erotic. I didn't see it happening until we met, if then. It felt the intensity-building way.

I pulled back, gently teased her agony, quickly said I'd call.

Mira: right, then.

And so, the phone, playful, sweet in the closening. After Mira and I'd said goodnight, I told Gabrielle about the image. We went to bed, smiling.

31 January 2001.

I woke from dream. I drove to work.

When Mira appeared, I told.

I was standing in a crowd in a modern-elegant meeting room in a lodge-casino surrounded by pine forest. I knew Beth had attended with me, but I didn't see her.

I had moved across the room. I was standing near a wall, looking down at persons there, on couches, sprawled. They had smoked too much marijuana.

I had moved to midway between the couches and the first place. I entered into an intense talk with an upright-standing slave girl. She showed me a leather-and-metal appliance that went over her head. She snapped the last straps into place.

The metal-studded leather bands held in place a short hard-leather tube that passed her lips and went on into her mouth. Anything could be inserted. I thought of the obvious phallic possibilities. I wondered how far she took her slavery-practices. We looked into each other's eyes, standing very close. She was filled with mysterious frozen power - anything but a weakling.

(Mira, suddenly intent, said to tell her more.)

I worried that Beth had wandered off. I worried that something bad had befallen her. I began to search. I went outdoors to peer into rooms through plate-glass windows. I saw the marijuana persons. I thought of the lotus-eaters. I felt irritation at their decadent passivity. I went back indoors, anxious.

I had entered a narrow corridor that led away from the reception room. The atmosphere was thicker. There was less light. There were fewer windows. I knew this was now the casino and I was in Las Vegas. I was completely alone. There was no life anywhere. It was windowless. I walked by a brushed-steel door to a stripper room. I felt I was coming closer to where Beth had been drawn. The air grew heavier with that oppressive porn strip-joint feeling.

(Mira said she was getting anticipatory.)

I was standing before a wall in the corridor. I was looking at a sign made of wood. The sign was mounted high on the wall. The sign bore raised wooden letters in a friendly-rounded '70s font. The letters were thick, crowded, garishly colored. Out of the last letter swelled a wood-

en direction-arrow, heeling round and down, then running straight to the left, to the first letters, plumping as it ran, a swelling underline. I did not know what the letters on the sign spelled. The arrow was painted with thin bands of alternate blue and pink. The arrow pointed to a dark door at the wall. A crude raised carving on the left side of the sign - sign was all one carved piece - showed in garish colors a bold-faced naked woman, reclined, legs spread open wide. Once one paid the fee, she would permit one to touch her vaginal lips. The drawing showed huge waves of water - blue, with little white foams atop - pouring out from around her vagina. An extension to the sign gave the cost to go in: $90.

I did not go in.

I walked on, suddenly without worry.

(Mira said she was on the edge of her bed.)

I was out of Vegas, out of the lodge. It was the present day, and it looked like California.

I was the driver of a sports car on a highway. There were vegetable fields on each side, cloudless blue sky, sun bright and strong. Ahead, the highway merged from two lanes to one and shot off across the fields, into the distance.

The ignition of my car had been turned off. I'd made a small traffic jam behind.

Yet the other drivers were utterly patient, waiting.

As soon as I awoke, the engine started.

I pushed down on the accelerator, and I moved forward.

The kink in the flow was ended.

The two merged into one.

I drove forward, quickly.

Mira called it incredible - said it made sense - wondered if perhaps meant I was free to move on from taking care of Beth.

She was brimming, near-speechless - I, vibratory and bright in my head - quiet in my lower body but at top strongly energized - she could feel it spilling off, wanted to see me like this in person.

She asked if I felt someway potentially - explosive - she'd sense of something beneath surface, about to erupt - she should be pacing - I felt energy flow down abruptly into my body - workplace barely contained me - I was flushed and hot, leaning forward, ready to sprint - we went layers deeper every day, she said, and today we'd reached a layer of action - warmth in her belly and upper thighs, feeling of electricity running across fingers - sizzling feelings in my legs, a sense we'd touched a primal level.

We spoke at length about the palpable energy. Our words were charged, direct, almost cutting. No play, no silly. We leaned toward each other, intently focused.

She could dance this, she said - could touch me and show it - but couldn't do it in words. I told her she didn't have to.

She had to leave, and dance. We parted, farewells suddenly like those past, but different.

We met that night, bantered happy-casual.

The morning's emotions, she said, hadn't come out in dancing - too roiled. Some parts of technique'd worked better than ever, while others hadn't at all. The net result hadn't been art.

Several days earlier, she'd said she dreaded my leaving Boston - invited on second visit, mentioned mock-offhand her formal choreography 'd be in April's second week and wouldn't that be lovely?

This night I teased about good airfares for round then - she chided me for encouraging her greed - told her I wanted her entirely greedy, not just for our relationship but for all of life.

Her chance to denounce my wicked ways was interrupted by her phone - Catherine, then, directly after, Roque.

Then it was our time.

After we'd said goodnight and she'd gone to bed, I checked her journal. A new entry.

I'd told incredible dream - it'd new-moved her, brought feral force, desire to run naked along cold windy beach with rain pounding her breasts. Now she wasn't in head - flowed into body, filled it utterly. She knew deep viscerality, knew "this numinous moment, this heightened awareness."

When Gabrielle'd finished reading, she looked up, said if Mira and I became erotic lovers she could only approve - this was to be fulfilled.

Mira'd titled it "Something's Coming."

1 February 2001.

A work-day, with easy things beside - sent dream to Gwen, showed Mira's entry - this writer, Gwen said, had energy to keep up with me - chatted again with Catherine - she lived in South Bay, not even hour away.

That evening, Mira and I talked long. What happened after goodnight, I'd tell next morn.

2 February 2001.

I'd closed my door, I said, mainly to exclude dandery cats. Gabrielle'd suffered in silence in her office, worried I'd meant to exclude, something secret going on.

Mira interrupted. Should we stop talking? She didn't want that, was crying at thought of it, but didn't want to hurt me or Gabrielle.

{ *oh, sweet soul* }

She felt an intruder, wrong to take any of me away - I said, sharp, this assumed intrusion, not welcome - subtraction, not addition. She knew - heard in her head, too: "But this is so wonderful! How could it hurt anybody?"

I told of pressing work. She'd be home for about two hours. I promised return. Smiling, she promised wait. I told her to breathe deeply. She pantomimed doing just so.

I stepped back into role of mortgage banker handling sudden interest-rate change. I worked quickly.

Returned, I asked state of her breathing. Strange, she said: she'd just received a letter from Matt.

He missed her, he wrote.

Their year together'd been perfect. He knew now he'd been scared, depressed, jealous, had held too tight, pushed sex.

(All of which, she said cleanly, was true.)

He wanted to be her lover again.

{ *no* }

My heart shot into my throat.

She'd answered it couldn't be.

I eased.

I brought my fingers to the keyboard, told her we'd things to talk about.

Mira: yes.

I began to tell she'd brought only good to me-and-Gabrielle. She interrupted to ask if she was blowing this all out of proportion.

I'd have asked her to explain.

I didn't have time.

In that moment came the words, in her own italics - the words, in truth, I'd never dreamed I'd see.

Mira: I just....*I love you, Michael.*

And my sails blew full.

5. Sailing

2 February 2001.

It entered me without shock.

There'd been light from the first.

And this, this was what had been wrapped in the core. This was what'd been coming.

We loved each other.

I felt simple gladness, clean at the roots. We'd been so clear, so good, walked with care and awareness, and this was our reward.

We couldn't stop to savor - much to talk of - but once we'd finished we could walk in it together, and be glad.

The romance angle, she said, wasn't all-important just then. Most of all didn't want to do anything to hurt me. Worry not, I said, about Gabrielle - told of her denunciations of exclusivity, how we'd known something might come.

Mira said she'd never been "polyamorist" - I smiled at sweet awkwardness - was all so new, wasn't sure how it was done. She asked me to go on.

Each time a boundary'd been crossed, I said, Gabrielle'd been initiator, gently eager about pushing the envelope. It'd emphatically not been passive woman versus active-persuasive man.

Mira: Somehow I didn't think it had been. :)

She cheered. She felt better.

This, I said, felt like flowers all over.

She'd to get to class. We parted, promising to talk that night or, at worst, next day.

We said goodbye in happiness.

Whatever was to come, we'd have had this.

I went forth into the consummate day.

When I told Gabrielle, afternoon, she asked if we'd meant in-love or just soul-love.

Some of both, I said - how much of each, not yet known. I reassured her it wouldn't break or diminish us in any way.

She said she'd need much talk and reassuring. I said we'd have it: night to ourselves - downtown for dinner and a movie, then back home to bed and to touch.

And we did.

3 February 2001.

We woke early - were taking a night at Tahoe - last extended time before Boston - told Mira, few days before, now wanted to send goodbye note.

A brief note was waiting.

In pas de deux class, night before, they'd worked on a contemporary piece improvised by the teacher, set to Chopin by the pianist. It was a love story, told in tiniest movements, of affection budding between two young lovers.

Dancing it'd made her feel clean and whole inside.

> *This morning I wake up and I wonder if yesterday was a dream.*
> *But I still love you in the morning. More than I did yesterday.*
>
> *With all my heart,*
> *Mira*

I read it again. Tears touched my cheeks.

I dialed, to thank, but roommate gruffly stated she was out. I left a message, then - not trusting - brief note.

Gabrielle and I ran downstairs, with duffels, and jumped into the car.

4 February 2001.

On impulse'd gone far north into redwoods - hotel with indoor pool - small-town dinner - back, swum and hot-tubbed - close, peaceful - then to bed.

Upon return, amid small parade of ICQ notes sent earlier that day - first serious, then teasing she missed me - the present Mira shrieked, pantomimed pounce, exclaimed I'd mail from night before.

Titled "Evening Song" - told of spending much Saturday with Cybil - I recognized - Citylighter, Jocelyn-friend - mid-twenties 'net-telephony genius - talked with her back in '99.

They'd lunched - dealt with a flat tire adventure - shopped through Harvard Square - gone to movie - purchased good things at Tealuxe.

She confessed second Mira-neurosis - come home worrying I'd be like Taylor - mad she'd not told me she'd be unavailable.

Roommate's message'd made it worse - but my note was soft, loving as ever - she speculated at length, almost incredulous, that perhaps I was a little miffed - yet it seemed I wasn't. And for that she was grateful: she knew fully, now, that I really wasn't Taylor.

Her friend Jeremiah was coming for brunch next morning, sleep was calling seductively - she hoped Tahoe'd been glorious, beautiful, and - though she didn't know her plans - that we'd talk the next day.

She ended in perfect simplicity -

5 days, Michael.

- signed "Love, Mira."

On ICQ, I said Gabrielle was freeing phone line. Mira expressed many thanks.

In our voices we repeated "five days," stressing vowels here, shaping rhythms there - and, amazed we could, that we loved each other.

5 February 2001.

Catherine told of gossip thickening.

Jocelyn, Roque, Taylor were broadcasting that Mira was in a dubious relationship, was in danger. Catherine brushed it aside, asked directly for my history and philosophy of romance. After, I wrote to Gabrielle:

i spoke directly at length to her questions, and she professed herself satisfied.
interesting from an evolutionary point of view: the woman - especially a younger one - is always the one presumed in danger!

As I drove home, I thought of Matt. He'd grown harsh after her refusal, particularly after hearing of me - said I only wanted sex. That, and Taylor, and all I'd heard from Gabrielle, Mira, Beth - grew into an anger at the gender of which I was said to be part.

At home I rapidly wrote an entry denouncing the desire to control. I ended -

We must paraphrase in living terms the wise Congressman who told the United States government how to end the war in Vietnam: "declare victory - and withdraw."
We must declare victory in the living world - by no longer withdrawing.

That night, I told Mira of my talk with Catherine.

Mira said she'd been contacted by Jocelyn and Roque - separately, but in united front: she was too young - I was too old; she was credulous - I was manipulative; she'd stars in her eyes - I'd use her for sex.

She laughed - hadn't told I knew not what she looked like - hadn't wanted to share even that of us.

She defied, she said, anyone who dared question us - even her mother, who'd grown leery, particularly of the non-exclusivity. They'd just have to learn it was real and true.

We spoke of how it'd grown from start, found own-nature, own-momentum.

Our voices went lower, quieter.

There was little stand-back left.

Our breaths went deeper.

We felt desire, and admitted it.
It went no further - but it went deep.

I walked into Gabrielle's office.
She looked up from computer, said "Look at this."
She'd written a personal ad.
It expressed the best in her.
I worried she'd fall for someone else and leave me.
I was thrilled at the risks we were taking.
I was proud of her going to new places.
I looked at my years' beautiful companion over life's waters.
"I like it," I said. "Send it."
She pressed the button.

6 February 2001.
She'd awakened, Mira letter-said, then just lain abed thinking of our talk.
So much, she said, had been within it - now we began to understand what'd lain underneath all along.
The form in the rock was beginning to come alive, to sing louder through the small layers that remained as yet unchiseled away.
It was morning, she ended, and her heart was singing.
So, after long rest, was mine.

When an AIM window appeared, I knew she'd arrived home.

Mira: - creeps up behind you and slips her arms about your waist-

She asked how my day was - the third day, I asked, before we *met*? She laughed, said she was without words for last night - I'd given big gift -

unsure how to express how much it meant - I said she had - her voice, her breath, her letter of morning.

She asked how was Gabrielle - a springy gazelle, I said - we'd been madly busy, talked briefly - she'd responses from guys I called "really cool" - Mira was thrilled - was she going to meet any? what had the ad said? - she almost shouted in curiosity.

Was taking it slow, I said - about fifteen so far - some seemed good, a few oddballs and stiffbacks - even if only few wonderful friendships came, it'd be great - Mira hoped she found someone beautiful, exclaimed at adventure - I said we were all going into a glimmering place - she agreed.

She gave a hug "just because" - I said I wanted to be with her, then and there, was tired of waiting - wondered if our missing'd be worse after meeting - likely worse, she said, citing past experience with long distance.

Suddenly nervous, I recalled distance'd helped doom Taylor-and-her - thought suddenly how Gabrielle was always up for sudden moves and new places - daring idea came - told Mira she should know - if we chose to continue romantically and found things fraying due to distance, I wasn't going to passively sit by and observe it happen.

She pantomimed sharp-eyed look - demanded to know what I meant - I said I'd decrease my distance from her, called her silly for not getting it - she pantomimed a sigh - I wasn't supposed to make her melt so - I made it sound so easy - I didn't worry about easy or hard, I said, didn't do insoluble tragedies.

She was quiet - I said if it was going too far, she need only to say so - no, she said, that wasn't it - speechless, overwhelmed - always'd assumed for us to be closer she'd have to move - hadn't expected this depth - not just from me, but ever to find in her life - was blown away, aching with astonishment, wondering what she'd done to deserve it.

She'd met, I said, the only requirement - she'd been herself. By conventional lights, I said, there'd to be snarl-ups, reservations, withholdings - but we weren't usual. She prayed to all divinity to please let us have a long time - she wanted that, more than anything else. I said I did, too - mutual greed in best sense.

Mira: You and I are pretty damn greedy, you know that?

With that, she'd to go - dinner to start, and the making of bread for us to eat when I was there.

As she left, I reflected. In Boston we might feast on the earthly loaf, but this day we'd tasted higher source, yet.

7 February 2001.

Mira and I'd decided: less talking - more tension.

That evening, I told I was - packing.

She pantomimed dance of glee.

I said that, after dinner with Gabrielle, a long call between them seemed in the cards.

Yes, please, she said - that'd be wonderful.

We walked downhill - right turn, Clement - new place - Blue Point - oysters, clams, delectable sauces.

When home, a note to both - her brain and body'd overloaded - exhaustion - hoped to recover from a cold - was off to bed - apologized to Gabrielle, literally falling over - probably not talk to me tomorrow, but oh, the day after ...

She hoped the meal'd been beautiful - promised to talk soon to "the beautiful Gabrielle-girl" - closed, "Hugs, Mira"

We went to bed, soon after. It was the last time we'd sleep together before I left.

8 February 2001.

This day I sent Mira a single note.

Bare facts of my flight.

I heard nothing.

The highest tension.

Work'd been a blur. At times I'd felt calm, present - others, almost out-of-body.

Late afternoon. Sun-yellows fading, darker oranges rising as it moved toward horizon.

Neatened desk, altered voicemail, got up.

Desks and chairs - darkened screens, silent phones.

I'd worked here for nine years.

I thought of Boston, turned, stepped into falling dusk.

Gabrielle and I walked to "26's" - sat - looked into each other's eyes - held hands - ate lightly - confidently smiled - nerves struck - hid not - assured.

Walking - lingered - not-quite-fog - stopped, looked north - street lamps sent light-cones up into watery air - knew, further north, air went out over water.

Turned, went up hill - our gate - lit-up corridor - lifted duffels - down steps - crossed city - bridge to Oakland - working-late traffic.

Airport signs - departs - spot by curb - out of car - arms thrown, fierce, around each other - told me to have incredible time - urged her to remember I loved, we'd not end.

I walked with my duffels straight to the gate.

Forty minutes in - hop flight to Las Vegas - reading Kendrick's memoirs - riding lull, quiet, happy - slight pressure in my arms, stomach - course correction - more force - deep banking - pushed toward window - wasn't right.

Shut book, put on floor - lean it on wall - look around - no look-ups, no chatter - rack brain - perhaps spiral for elevation - but we're on horizon-level.

Voice on speaker - Captain - "... returning to Oakland immediately ... cleared for an expedited landing ... left engine indicator light ... oil pressure ... we've shut down the engine ... we can fly on only one ... we'll have you folks back to Oakland in no time ..."

Sickly flower of terror blossoms in me - this is two-engine'd jet - stomach hollow - heart begins to pound - images of crashing, body crushed -

{ *you haven't even met her* }

- cabin quiet - no cries, no screams - humidity of fear-of-violent death goes through.

Force decreases - we're level - flying straight, onward in night, toward our beginning.

I look left - neighbor - forties - business-casual - turns to me - I reach across space, touch shoulder - I, gently, "How are you doing?" - looks at me, smiles - "I'm alright" - moment he says, it's true - fear gone - long as we two keep contact, we're well.

Tells of his daughter - "She's - only two years old." - his eyes widen - "I want to see her graduate college." - I tell him he'll see her forty - to distract, offer, I tell of Gabrielle-and-Mira - he listens - I touch his shoulder, time to time - world brightens.

Attendants - listen - crash position - Oakland near - he crosses himself - plane flies on - descent - trees moving against lights - he begins to pray.

They order us in position - I obey, folding myself - feel breath in me - moving, own accord - take deep breath - may be end.

My old desire stirs - *see* my death - experience even that - I disobey - unclasp, unfold - raise head.

Line of vehicles - waiting - red lights - Mira, Gabrielle - silently tell I love them - street lights gone - house lights go.

Only reds - whites - rushing darkness.

Feeling rises - we'll live to see dawn.

We touch down - aft, fore - one of gentlest - engine blows into reverse - we're slowing - one'd not know amiss - we applaud - he avoids eyes - silently wish him, daughter all good.

Taxi in - cabin-lights - walk off - empty fluorescent-lit terminal - some to payphones to be picked up - most line up for rebook - television crew arrives, sets up tripods.

9 February 2001.

Two hours in line - during rebook, impulse - two day extend - agent does, jolly mood - tickets in hand, call Mira - tell - safe - flying out in few hours - mid-afternoon she'll be at class - can't miss - I say we should meet there - she agrees - calls serendipitous if scary - gives address, location of studio, strikingly precise mass-transit directions - we say goodnight - voices quiet, immersed.

I wake Gabrielle - speeds to Oakland - drives home, across bridge, through quiet city - straight to bed - drift through almost-sleep in each other's arms - two-and-a-half hours - alarm goes off - time to leave - again through city - across great bridge - airport up ahead.

Northern Arizona ground - 31,000 feet - reflect-morning-light - walls, ceiling - snacks served, lights dimmed - body feels sour, confined - consciousness stuck in-present - slightly constricted - wonder if shock - want to be supple - shift around - rest, if not sleep - close eyes - begin to drift.

I do not sleep, but my body is peaceful.

All is silent for me except air-rushing, outside.

Unmeasured time later, the ringing of a bell.

The Captain's voice.

We're beginning our descent.

IV. BOSTON

9-14 Feb. 2001

Paderewski's playing … possesses that subtle quality expressed in some measure by the German word Sehnsucht*, and in English as "intensity of aspiration." This quality Chopin had, and Liszt frequently spoke of it.*

- William Mason (1892)

9 February 2001.

We reached the sunlit cloudtops - cruised down into clear channel between cloud-columns - they towered as we fell - slender grey lines ahead - passed inside light-grey cloud - minutes later, partings - whites and greys flew past - suddenly all gone - snowy Boston under us.

We shuddered, slowing - side-winds rocked us - we sought final approach - straightened, then dropped - a gold grass-swath - cell-line of hurricane fence - red lights atop striped poles - brief snow - asphalt, closer - two impacts - thrust-reverse - attendant welcomed us - plane halted - we stood - walked off.

Taxi and bus stands - frigid air - cab slushed forth - gave address - he called fare - things passed in grey - city hovered oddly above and below freezing - various-thicked clouds passed differing lights to earth - no blue, no sun, some patches of almost-white.

We reached downtown - bright colors of umbrellas, lit shop windows - we turned and turned - thought of London cabbies - pulled up to construction barriers - sign hung at center -

ROAD CLOSED

- "Can get you to the front door," he said, "but have to detour." - "No, thanks, here's fine." - paid - into whistling wind - pulled duffels, shut door - looked all around, to take in.

In four-way intersection - buildings going to sky - no people, no motion, almost no sound - turned to barriers - heard cab's wheels spin, then catch - it turned a corner, was gone.

I walked through barrier-gap, then up on sidewalk - steam whipped from manhole cover - walked steadily - mist wetted face and hair - heels crunched snow - numbers went down.

A wide-fronted building.

I knew it was the one.

I walked through the front doors into an atrium.

Warm air - soft light - unimpeded space rising up - pastels and light earths - faint piano-sound from above.

I turned right, walked to Security-desk.

A warm-faced older man looked up. "Ed?" I said. (She'd told of him, called him sweet soul.)

"Why yes. How may I help you?" "I'm here to meet Mira Graham in Studio Four. May I leave my bags here while I go up?" "Certainly, but you'll have to sign in first."

I wrote on clipboard, brought bags to side-door.

Ed put them in the back.

He smiled. "Go on up, Mr Brown."

I turned. A broad staircase was before me.

I walked to it, wiped off my face, and took the first step.

As I rose slowly, I felt the whole span of my life.

I looked ahead.

Sunlight slanted in from a bank of windows at right. I reached a small landing, turned right - up the last few steps.

I was at the top. Open double-doors to left.

Sound of feet striking floor. A woman spoke sharply, inside.

Mira's directions stopped here.

I walked quietly to doorway - stopped, leaned at jamb to left - so I'd be seen, but didn't bulk center.

I looked inside.

Perhaps twenty dancers doing repetitive leaps. Each'd shoot up, arm stretched high, then land, arm continuing down, smoothly.

A short older woman - dark grey skirts, almost-black shirt, grey hair tied back - walked about abruptly.

She cried something like "balloon!"

They began leaping higher.

I saw myself in mirror-wall at rear - still, tall, self-contained in long brown overcoat.

I looked at the columns of dancers. Each girl - there was one boy - was slender. Most had bun'd hair, most were blondes.

I couldn't make out their faces in motion, but similar impress to each - clear, oval-shaped, focused.

She called something in French. They stopped leaping.

They stood in place and began raising arms, slowly - my eyes shot to girl in second row, mid-distance.

I knew nothing of this art - found of all perhaps most alien - but her movements, as arms rose and came down - hands and wrists in fluttered spirals, elbows suddenly vanished in smooth-curved arms - spoke to me, clearly as a quiet melody of Chopin's.

In that moment ballet first spoke to me its wordless language of the stylized body.

I looked away - the feeling stopped. I looked at others - didn't feel. I looked back - it returned.

I looked at her closely.

She seemed tallest of the class - her face most elongated - skin paler, more clear - seemed to put more into her dancing - stretch higher, special grace of fluency in hands and arms.

A word came - it was "aspiration."

Silently I asked, "Is it you?"

She was the most classically ballerina-like - features of greatest purity, form of highest refinement. I amused myself - she'd reacted no more than anyone. I'd just selected the most-admirable one.

I began to wonder - this was the right studio - had she not come in? - ought I look elsewhere?

I was losing the present, when the instructor spoke again.

They broke out of their lines, spread in individual free exercises. I saw the most-beautiful one begin to pirouette.

I turned slightly, to face her.

She danced away from the rest, spun down the floor, toward the studio window-bank.

She stopped in line with doorway, facing mirror-wall.

My reflection was gone. I could only see her.

She raised herself en pointe - leaped up, spinning - came down, landed turning round and round. She finished in deep bow, hands folded like petals - perfectly still.

Then she shot up - turned to me - launched herself in sprint - streak of gold hair and strong limbs.

She crashed into my chest.

Our arms crushed round each other.

She and I embraced.

After a moment, thought: "Am I hugging her too hard?"

She hugged tighter. I tightened my arms.

We stood outside time - loosed arms, leaned back - still embraced - looked at each other.

She'd a pale forehead that seemed windswept sky - huge, strange blue-silver eyes looking into mine - smile of unconquerable joy.

The words rose to my lips.

"Hello, love!"

She took in breath, said, "Hello, dearest!"

She stood just below my nose; her hair was bun'd back in ballet-way - little darker than pale-gold - her head small - flowed down round her eyes spread wide across her face to a small chin.

Her eyes searched my face back and forth. Her smile widened, she bent knees, leaned away, back arched, body pressed to me, eyes almost closing, smile waxing huge.

She straightened. Smile vanished. She looked, gravely, eyes full on me - she lowered her chin, eyes fixed, seeming to probe, darker - raised hand, laid it on my cheek. I laid mine on hers.

Time, again, was not. I stood in a timeless clearing - had emerged from a wood, and here was the new woman to greet me in the new day.

We pulled each other close, softly.

There was nothing more to the world than this newborn body, life rising in curve of intertwined touch from our calves all the way to the hair pressed to my cheek.

We'd reached the timeless center. We were free.

From Studio Four came a hand-clap and cry. She glanced over-shoulder,

then back, smiling.

"I must go, darling. Will you stay and watch the class?"

"Of course!"

She ran in. I stepped to right of doorway, leaned against wall, watched as she danced. Her face was intent; she didn't look at me. I watched her moving in the mirror-filled room, watched her body - she whose mind I'd felt across a continent - moving in service of expression. My mind worked to grasp this art's voice.

As she moved, I looked at every inch of her and wondered if we'd make love.

Break declared. They came in pink and grey tights to use bathroom by stair-top, drink from wall-fountain across from me. She exited with arch look, as if not seeing me - then, almost past, smiled and winked.

I was watching a young dancer - about sixteen - pour pills from a bottle into her palm. The arch-looker swished past, whipped head toward me, bugged eyes, stuck out tongue, and was gone, into the studio.

I slapped my thigh through the coat, shook my head, and laughed.

Class was done. We hugged, walked to stair-top. She'd change to street clothes then come back.

As I watched her fly through lobby, round corner to bottom floor, I remembered "quick" had originally meant "alive."

I wandered back to Four - stepped through last dancers leaving - stopped in doorway - empty studio - scratched hardwood floor - mirrors reflecting floor, walls, each other.

I was going into daze. I looked at studio, buildings outside. What was there was simply what was there. It was as if all concept and history were being destroyed.

I wondered if a piano on this floor. Turned left, crossed footway over lobby, slowly, almost ginger. Looked in Studio Three - unoccupied - in right corner, piano.

I walked, sat, began to improvise - wanted to not be where she expected.

I wanted her to hear distant music, and come.

Daze began to go. Tension was replacing it. Soon we'd be alone.

My heart began to pound.

I hardly knew what my fingers did.

Out of corner of eye, I saw her in doorway.

I didn't look away from the piano.

I improvised on.

She came in, turned right, walked slowly, head lowered, along outer wall. Her footsteps, through music.

She reached wall-corner, turned, began toward piano.

My hands were shaking. Didn't know how long I could continue.

She passed behind me. Steps stopped.

She was standing behind me.

I heard a faint sound - rustle or a scrape. I turned head partway.

She was letting herself slide limply down the wall.

I turned back.

As if from miles away, I watched my hands.

The lights went burning white.

Moment of highest tension.

I lifted my hands from the keys.

I turned around, looked down. She was sitting on floor, knees up, hands loose in her lap. Her eyes were huge, silver-blue.

She was looking at me, unsmiling, lips parted and trembling.

Our eyes locked.

We reached out at the same moment, touched each other's cheeks.

"Hello," I said.

Her eyes grew wet. So did mine.

She whispered, "Hi."

I touched across her cheek, then forehead, down to shoulder. I lowered palm to her calf, pressed. I reached up, closed it on her knee through jeans, rubbed with my fingers, felt the solidity.

This was her body. She touched my cheek, cross my face and forehead, through hair.

It was then I knew, in my body, that she, and it, and we - were real.

She leaned aside, tucked calves under, sat up, straight from the knee.

I slid to bench's edge. Eye contact never broke.

She leaned, I leaned down to her, we slipped arms round, pulled each other in. We pressed hands to each's back.

She laid her head on my shoulder. I closed my eyes, inhaled. She smelled clean, warm, herself.

We felt the other's breathing, the body-warmth - shifted, got closer. We moved hands on each other's backs - up and down, then shoulders.

Stilled, held tighter - stayed still, for a long time.

I didn't want to move.

We pulled back, same moment - laughed, pulled all way, found ourselves eye to eye, unsmiling, shocked into present.

I was shaking my head in wonder.

We hugged, then rose. I offered my arm. She took it and we strolled silently to the doorway, her hip brushing my thigh.

As we crossed footway, I looked at front doors. We rounded past Four, walked downstairs, arm-in-arm.

I put my head in at Ed's side-door. He brought duffels forward, quizzical. I wondered if he wondered.

I lifted them, walked with her to door. We passed outside, to streets of a cold and clear Boston evening.

❧

We walked fast over cobblestones, casting little smiling looks at each other - almost same rapid gait, same pleasure in click of shoe on cobbles, in swinging along next to the other.

Few blocks in, she looked at duffel, said, "That looks heavy," reached out.

I knew it was time.

I gripped it away, said, lofty, "Certainly not, Mira. After all, you're the *weaker sex* and must be protected."

She bared teeth, said "Ooohh!" and grabbed. I yanked back, said, "Oh no you don't!"

She got her hand on strap, pulled - I tugged - "I told you - you'd not

be winning - any easy victories" - she threw her whole body - I twisted trunk, grip near failing - "around here, missy!"

I dropped other bag - began to jerk, double-hand - she barnacle-held, so I began to whirl - "Turn loose," I said, voice rising, "or you're gonna go flying!"

She held on, valiant, but I reversed hard, unpredicted - threw in unexpected arm-relax followed by jerk-in - she lost grip, spun away over cobbles.

I scrunched my lips toward nose, shook head back and forth, mocking. She laughed, screamed "Damn you!"

I picked up bags, resumed walking, faster. She ran, caught up. I looked over.

"Here." I shoved the duffel at her. "Carry this, woman." She bared her teeth, then laughed as she grabbed.

We walked past gold-lit mullioned-window shops, as if weightless. We smiled, and talked not.

Through small square - still cobbled - cross diagonal, catching breaths, tree-trunks about, black leaf-canopy over dim sky - I looked at her.

She wasn't tall, but slenderness and decisive motion made her seem. She wore long black cape to below knees - long pour of hair, unbunned now, fell in ringlets and waves in light-beams from beyond square, over her shoulders - cape held by great silver claw-clasps in front - she moved with confidence and snap under it.

I saw why men fantasized her an imprisoned object.

We reached transit-station, purchased handful each of bronze tokens. Before long, trolley. Its doors opened - walked inside, took facing seats - doors shut - car accelerated, lights dimming slightly.

We took hands. Eyes locked again. Silently, we leaned forward and brought our foreheads to touch. Tingling spread across my head, down my neck.

"I feel your thoughts," I said quietly. "As I feel yours," she whispered back.

We laid heads on each other's shoulders and hugged tight. As we went through curves, crossed dips, I closed my eyes. The other-world sense returned.

She'd come in a cascade of words that'd been more than words. Now, pure touch.

We rounded past a few closed stores, into residential blocks.

It was cold, clearer than downtown, sky darker above snowed trees. We crunched glinting carpet unbroken along sidewalks, over curbs, across streets. No car passed, no person afoot. We went in crackling-dry air through silent neighborhoods.

I saw ahead, walking toward, amid buildings, a dark-coated person, shoulders gathered together, hands plunged.

Mira called out "Hi." He nodded peremptorily, turning aside in passing. I looked at her.

"Who's that?"

"My roommate. He works for Cybil."

"He didn't seem especially happy."

"He - disapproves."

"Of us?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"He doesn't like a lot of the people I bring over. Also - our ages."

A heat of anger rose to my cheeks. What'd they know of this? The care we'd taken?

I shook my head. "I wish they'd get off that."

Her mittened hand took mine. "I know, darling. They don't understand. They will."

The heat eased. I squeezed her fingers.

We walked, hand-joined.

Into courtyard of her building - three stories, two wings - old-fashioned - perhaps '30s - she unlocked little post-box door - slipped envelopes into cloak - we stepped inside warmed lobby, through fire-door to building-back, up two flights of stairs.

Out at top, a right turn - down hallway - she stopped at last door on the left.

She smiled. "This is it."

Unlocked, went in - shut it behind me - pointed to door ajar, been covered by its swing - roommate's, she said - couldn't close, I saw, from tangle of cable snaking in - he was up all hours, she said - sounded disapproving - perhaps messy dark rooms - perhaps nights in service of computer networks.

She pointed - bathroom, right-angle to roommate's - walked down hallway - small kitchen, '40s-seeming - a closed door - "My room," smiling - at other side, inbuilt wall-nook, old-style glass-and-wood doors - living room.

Small dining-table - on it, two candles by window to courtyard - television aside doorway - couch opposite, window behind - easy chair to right, angled to face couch - closet door behind chair - art prints on walls - unframed, tacked - Pre-Raphaelites.

Room's light was Christmas-bulbs - tiny, clear, bright-white - strung along top-molding, run all round several times - glow bounced from whitewash walls, hardwood floors - suffused all with softened, slightly dim gold-white.

Dropped duffel behind easy chair, took off coat - she unclasped cloak, opened closet - rich color-sea of her coats and shirt-tops and scarves - luxurious - thought of trophy-hunters - door shut-click.

We walked to room-center - no coats - embraced slowly, sliding - felt our male and female forms - looked into each other's eyes, smiling, still.

After time, I looked at couch, said, "Sit with me." She first - I at other end, quarter-turned and dropped back, my head in her lap.

I looked up.

She was above me, smiling down, lights behind her.

She touched her cool fingers to my brow.

Another time had come.

I reached up, took her hand in mine, laid our joined hands on my chest, and spoke.

"I felt you from the first words. It's grown, ever since, but you can't tell just from words." My eyes grow wet. "I came from a long way away to see, and - Mira - it's still here. We're real."

She nodded, tearing. "I feel it too, love. More, even, than I expected."

We looked into each other.

I lifted my hand from hers and laid it on the side of her cheek.

I wanted to tell her - us to kiss. But intuition that'd guided from beginning, bade me wait.

We began to smile.

It turned into sound.

"Yes, Michael," she said, golden with light - touching me as we laughed - over my neck, cheeks, forehead, in my hair - "Yes, Michael. Yes. Yes. And yes and yes and yes and yes."

We stayed for a long time, talking, touching softly.

She said, quickly, "Let me show you my room."

We jumped up - through hallway - she opened door, switched on light, walked ahead.

I stepped into the center of her personal life.

She swept hand toward open laptop, room-center, papers round it - clothes thrown, pens and paper, surprising-few books, most in small bookcase to my left - caught sight of two paperbacks - *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and, close by, *Atlas Shrugged*.

The wall I faced was chaotic foam - slogans, quotes, drawings, postcards, stamper-art, photos of people, art prints, magazine-clippings - no common theme, certainly no theory-base - yet had own unity.

She closed door - more paper, up and down doorframe - one, stamped with hearts, thorns surrounding them, read "Thorny Heart Productions" - I asked - "Oh, that's when my mother and I do stamp-art together" - above, photo of striking-faced girl - Mira gave name - friend.

I turned left.

Abutting art-wall - head of small topsheetless bed - there it was - place I was thought contriving to occupy at all costs.

She smiled, moved hands apart and up, said, "So, what do you think?" I felt largeness of being with her. All thoughts of webs - and spiders - blew off.

"I like this room," I said. We walked into each other's arms. "I like the person who lives here, too." She leaned into me. I felt her, from thighs to forehead, pressed. All was still.

I pulled back, looked in her eyes from very close, closer than friends get. They widened. Her chin dropped slightly.

My fingertips brushed her cheek, down her neck, across her wide shoulders.

I thought of Gabrielle, across darkening-continent, said it was time I called. Mira smiled, said Gabrielle'd be happy to hear how well it was all going.

It was near midnight - round two hours later.

I'd dialed the toll-free line I kept in apartment - each talked to Gabrielle - been more fluent than when I was at home. For a while they'd talked so closely I wondered if they'd grown lost in their connection and forgotten about me.

After, we'd gotten snack - I'd been physically bounding, without food-need since arrival - looked around apartment - she'd given background of her room's art - we'd sat on couch and talked - easy as breathing.

In past minutes, Mira's eyes'd grown heavy - yawns - she'd vowed we'd stay up until 5am the first night - said I'd say goodnight to Gabrielle, then time for sleep.

She hello'd, rushed - readying to go out - been talking with ad-answerer - San Francisco - Darin - web-designer, worked with theatre troupe in evenings - they'd decided to meet, spur of moment - coffee - I told Mira in pause - her eyes were wide.

I and Gabrielle exclaimed - sudden adventure we'd been working for - edgy, good - I asked where might go - she'd no idea - doubted they'd

have sex that night - told her do whatever felt right so long as stayed safe - thanked me for leaving in her hands.

Soon, time to go - long byes, scattered kisses - we loved each other - wished her good adventuring - we hung.

Outside was snow and cold and dark. Inside, a room suddenly more intimate, warm and lit and silent but for sounds of radiators and pipes.

I sat by her. We didn't speak. The room's objects looked sharper in contour. The quietness seemed to have its own tension. Sense of connection as I looked into the eyes across from me, that didn't waver or hide, was richer.

The night was ours.

We talked of little things for a time, then she yawned.

I told her she should get some sleep. She agreed, said she'd class the next day.

We walked hand in hand to her room. She shut door, moved toward the bed. I stood back a little - didn't want, by posture or position, to presume we'd sleep together.

She went to the dresser, held out folded sheets - some raucous colors, one blue-and-white. "I've tie-dye," she said, "and I have blue sky. Which would you like?"

From her eyes, I knew there'd be no air mattress.

"Let's sleep on the clouds," said I.

She put the others back in the dresser, then, against art-wall spread out ours.

I pulled bed away from wall - we put sheet on mattress, tucked in, then top sheet - worked quietly, few words or glances. Soon covers were smoothed atop, pillows arranged, bed pushed flush.

Nothing left to do.

I walked round the foot, stood by her.

"So how do you want to do this?" she said, voice little harder, face serious. "We can wear sweatpants or - if you're comfortable - underwear and t-shirts. I usually sleep in underwear." "Underwear and t-shirts works for me." She smiled, said she'd be right back, scooped up shirt and walked out, turning right.

I walked to easy chair - pulled t-shirt - shucked off day-shirt, tossed behind chair - put on new - returned to room, stood by pillows. Everything drained away. Body without tension, mind without thoughts.

She came in in shirt - pants on, like me. She walked to me and stopped. We stood for moment, gently awkward. Smiles came as we avoided eyes.

She reached for her pants-button as I reached for mine. She pulled jeans over hips as I tugged on my zipper. I stole look as her hip reached light, then light fell down her leg as she bent to take pants down.

She folded, laid them on floor, got under covers, and lay flat. I kicked feet free, watched pants land by hers. I lifted covers and slid in - trace of warmth on sheet.

We slid together, legs and hips touching, her skin smooth and warm and taut.

We turned, faced one another.

I lifted my right leg over her thigh and pressed down, she moved her left between my two, I laid my right hand on the up-curve of her hip.

We snuggled down, heads close. "Feels good, uh?" I said.

She sighed. "Very good." Her hands met at my back, held me closer. Smell of her skin and hair came.

"Very good," I said. "And very right."

She lifted her head, looked in my eyes, serious. "It felt right - from the beginning."

"Yes, it did. And I knew that you knew that I knew -" I lifted hand, made corkscrew with index finger.

She smiled, made silly face - bugged eyes slightly, bit lower lip. "It was kinda obvious," she said.

"Did you know?"

"I - hoped. When you told me about Ingrid, I was afraid it was going to be her, not me."

"It was always you - from the first words."

Her eyes shone. I put my hand in her hair, moved in long, soft strokes. She mirrored on my back. I brought finger to her ear, traced edge. "You have nice ears," I said.

She cupped my ear gently. "So are yours. Kinda small." I remembered Nietzsche - he'd said his were small to hear things unheard.

"Ours are rather alike, Miss Mira."

She returned hand to my back, put up eyebrows in exaggerated innocence. "Us, alike? We've no similarities whatsoever."

I nodded soberly. "None at all."

I leaned forward, kissed curved top of her ear, back-falling hair, her forehead. She closed eyes, breathed deeper. Her fingertips dug gently into my back.

In a dark pool of water at far end of my body, many miles away, a tiny heating began.

I touched her forehead, cheek with soft kisses. She raised a hand to my hair, began running fingers through. My breath deepened.

We tightened arms.

Waves began in the water.

They rolled forward, through the dark, advancing, advancing.

I touched my lips to her cheek again.

I was pulling back, but she opened her eyes. She looked at me, an inch apart.

I stopped. She turned her face up, toward mine.

I felt her breath on my lips.

We stayed there, frozen.

The waves beat on, closer.

We moved faces nearer.

(the warmth of her face)
We moved slower still.
(breaths together)
Time stopped.
Our lips touched.
They parted, slid deeper along.
The waves rose.
We relaxed them, then kissed in again, deeper.
Moistness of her mouth came in over my lips.
We slid our mouths along, in short kisses.

Mouths we opened. Our tongues touched very softly, kisses deepened, nearest waves began to break, around me, on top, inside, flowing, long waxes and wanes.

Waxes came stronger, and I pulled away. I looked across at her - so other, so familiar.

"Mira," I said.

Her breath was very quiet and very sure. "Yes."

I stopped for a moment. I felt all of it, our road from the beginning. Words were coming, flying ahead of the waves. I didn't say them in a moment's heat. I paused for a moment, to feel it out, one last time.

And though waves were coming to crest, though almost gone out of myself - I was well with it.

I looked across at her, and finished it.

"I love you."

The waves carried her to me fully, me to her, arms very tight, her lips at my ear, whispering intensely, "Oh god, Michael, I love you too," our bodies pressed against each other from, our calves to heads, lips meeting again and opening, daring the waves higher yet, warming sea cresting, continuing to rise and heat.

Our hands traveled over each other's fearless bodies.

I felt her tongue enter my mouth, taste inside hungrily. I tasted into hers, deeper yet. One of her arms moved, then her hand on my chest, her pulling her head back. She shook her head. I looked, perplexed.

"Not - like that, okay?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't kiss me like that. Don't plunge your tongue in so far."

I felt moment's annoy at her abruptness.

Then I relaxed - just awkward. "Regret it felt bad," I said.

"It's okay. Just getting to know one another, you know."

"So, how do you like to be kissed?"

"A little less forcefully. More playing at the lips."

I felt humor returning. "Hmm, something like - "

I kissed as she'd said. It felt sweet, if withheld in passion. When we pulled back, she clapped hands against my chest, said "That's it." I winked, said, "Well, practice is said to make perfect."

We hugged, began to kiss. It was different - softer, not as heated - deeper though, more penetrant. The waves moved, hands tightened, caressing, lips played more hungrily at edges, tongues moving with them in complexer, closer rhythm.

We grew frenzied, and as I felt the passion in her I'd hoped, I pulled her to me in strength, ran hands from her thighs to her face. I gloried in her touching me as boldly as I touched her.

I felt wild energies let loose.

I whipped my head to her, voice quiet but almost guttural in intensity. "Mira, I'm in love with you!"

She met me, unshrinking, eyes dark. "I'm in love with you, Michael, *and I have been!*"

Fury rose in me. I clasped her, violent.

She dug her hands into me.

Our mouths raked one another, making and tasting every sensation we could.

The waves blazed in the sun. We were magnificently akin.

No weaker, no stronger.

We'd known, without words of it, we'd not make love this night. And so, in perfect rhythm, after timeless time of passion, ardor eased, without disappoint. I existed again, found myself atop her, limbs twined, each of us gasping. She got out, "Well, there's no doubt - that we're chemically compatible!"

Soon her face was relaxing - showed quiet joy as we talked and laughed on way to sleep.

As we talked, I wandered fingers through her shirt, over muscled curves of her stomach - found little piercing-ring at navel. I brushed over it, we looked in one another's eyes, said nothing. "Another facet," I thought, happily.

We kissed sweetly few more times, almost as if passion'd never been. She turned over, we spooned close, and in few minutes she was asleep.

Little sleep-spasms came and went. I looked at covers - quick twitches - one place, another - impulses flying down body. They grew stronger. Moving so she didn't wake, I backed to mattress-edge, turned, lay flat, looked at blue-white light on ceiling, from windows.

My mind didn't want to sleep. I never told her, but I stayed awake for hours that night

Sometimes I'd look at her, sometimes at ceiling, sometimes at room-things in faint light.

I thought of her, of our beautiful two months, of the flight to Vegas, of Gabrielle, of the man she was meeting - of the passion that'd bolted up in this room.

Early morning was coming when I turned quiet.

As night left, so too did I.

We, at last, slept.

noise - morning light, movement … then i know who and where … she climbs over me - shuts alarm

I came awake - she, few inches above, looked into my eyes, smiling - snuggled down, kissed warmly - she rolled off, stood up, stretched, bending backward flexibly.

Early class - we showered one after other, dressed, got out - white winter day, quick walk to trolley - stood on snowless open platform in gusts, holding hands. She looked down tracks, I looked at her pure-form face and gold hair against deep blue sky.

Trolley came - sat with other Saturday travelers - picked up speed, slowed for station, sped again - swayed before tunnel-portal - our stop

- at stand just before stairs I bought orange juice - Mira got breakfast - looked like low-fat muffin - walked upstairs, then windy streets.

She went downstairs to change - I signed, went up to Four.

I sat on bench under-window, watched them arrive in leotards and tights - most seemed younger than Mira - gym bags and backpacks - water bottles in hand - faces determined - a few glanced at me, passing - I watched gathered muscularity of their legs - so different to arms' long slenderness - wondered at link between ballet and Mira's consciousness - what'd been her path here?

She passed talking with peer - exchanged quick smiles - felt warm, secret - wondered what people'd think of our night.

The task-mistress was already stalking the boards. I sat back to watch what she'd make of her class.

❧

At break they came to drink and refill bottles - stood, mostly small-group'd, with hand holding bottle, other on-hip - reached into bags or packs, took out plastic bottles - Advil, Tylenol - small handfuls with water - most bottles bulk-buy.

Mira came out, filled bottle, reached in bag, swallowed large handful - thought of her email signature - Tori Amos quote - "Give me pain - Give me myself again."

I went to her, quietly said I'd call Gabrielle, tell of night, see how her'd gone - she pressed my hand, asked me to say hello.

I walked to lowest floor - phone just outside girls' changing-rooms - no answer - after 1pm there - Gabrielle was in rehearsal for Fauré *Requiem* - no idea if she'd left yet - imagined them kissing, bodies pressing as my and Mira's had - didn't worry - thought-image itself slightly erotic - but not knowing made tension.

I called, left mail - all well, we'd not made love but'd crossed barriers - missed her, couldn't wait to talk, nervous and excited about Darin - loved her.

I went back up - for hours, watched Mira go through classes - would not know until later that Gabrielle'd sent a note that morning.

Good morning! I am off to all-day rehearsal and then voice lesson - I hope you had a wonderful night - I did with Darin! I will tell you all about it tonight. I love you very much - have a beautiful day!

Love,
Gabrielle

Mira and I walked in deeper twilight - after day at School, we'd gone to Cambridge on trolley - meet Jeremiah for coffee.

Passed news vend-machine - bold-lettered progressive tabloid warned women of being objectified in media - "I've been asked to model," she said evenly - I looked, listening - she'd turned down - didn't want that world - I nodded, thinking of the Academy.

Fluorescent-lit ATM alcove - sign on stone building-side: "Wainwright Bank - Banking on Values" - as New England, I thought, as the streets round us - Brattle Square, Sparks Street, Holyoke Place - underbreaths of old-England.

I looked at her - upright carriage, clarity of expression - suited this place - right she lived here - remembered feel of her letters - she moved through snow like that: over a clear foundation, an easy swing.

We arrived - broad open space back from street, tables and chairs, entrances to shops - one wall, bookstore window-display.

I bought coffee, sat telling Mira of visits to MIT in Randian days - she listened quietly, eyes straight on mine - man on bicycle rounded in - "There he is" - he dismounted, coasted up on pedal.

I sat straighter.

He kickstanded, sat at my side - looked at Mira, shook my hand with briefest eye-contact, pulled away - small and compact, quick gestures, pointed beard - reminded of Pan.

He laid fanny pack on table, excused - bathroom - Mira and I smiled, touched fingertips - pulled apart before return with glass of tea - sipped as we began to talk - worked for electric motor company - his-and-my conversation drifted there.

We were speaking of physics - he took sudden issue with something

I'd said. He began to summarize quantization of energy - took out pen, drew diagram on a piece of paper. He tapped the paper now and then with the pen to emphasize a point. He was looking in my eyes now, speaking with greater force.

As Mira sat quietly watching, I began to tense. He was talking at peculiar length, overly fine detail, as though a button had been pushed to begin a taped physics lecture. He didn't ask if we understood, invited no interaction - no analogy or metaphor, no history, no context. It was as if the ideas'd rise up and connect themselves.

He stopped summarizing, began to cover point by point, eyes shiny, looking at me almost fixed, hardly blinking.

{ so, jeremiah - you want her for yourself }

I felt my stomach harden against him. I kept replies brief, affirming, hoping he'd notice audience wasn't with him.

When he was done I felt drained - mentally flat, jittery in body. I suggested we walk somewhere. Mira said she'd been wanting to go to chocolate cafe with me, so we left. Good to be in open air, walking, Jeremiah more regular, if quiet, walking with bike helmet at back of head.

We entered chocolate place - well-peopled, warm, dark-wooded, lit up golden inside - Boston-motif, it seemed - bought things - I teased Burdick's no match for California's Scharffen Berger - she sniffed, said humorous-arch she'd have to judge for herself. I thought of showing her my state, her meeting Gabrielle, Darin.

We left, rambled through streets - Jeremiah wheeled bicycle quietly - I wondered his thoughts. Mira and I by tacit agreement hadn't touched in his sight - I missed it.

We entered arcade-building - small shops scattered - comic store - suddenly gone happier - Jeremiah in a row, Mira elsewhere - I walked silently - there she was, looking quickly along titles - snuck up behind, touched palms to her back - she arched against, drew breath. I walked on. Neither of us'd said a word.

Further in - jewelry store - Mira led, looked through cases - asked to see piercing-gem - held up - blood-red - said, "Maybe this one. Ack,

wish I could afford it." - as salesperson replaced, I thought of sneaking back, buying for her.

We went out in hallways - soon ended, so back to street - walked at random - frigid air - into coffee-place to warm - then, blocks later, exotic-food store - we fanned out - rows for India, Thailand, Korea, others - I was looking at wickery rice-bags with stamped howdah elephants - Mira walked up - we looked at boxes of curries for a bit - Jeremiah appeared suddenly.

"I'm going to leave now," he said, quickly - tone natural enough but void of context.

I extended my hand, said, "Good meeting you." He shook - brief, firm - said "farewell" - few words goodbye to Mira - turned, walked out. We watched door swing shut.

"What," I said, "was that?"

"I - don't know. That wasn't like him."

"Did I bug him?"

"I have no idea. You were fine. I'll have to ask him."

"Kind of weird at the beginning. Intellectual chest-pounding."

"Well, I don't know higher mathematics. Mainly it was interesting watching you two interact."

"Not much during the lecture," I grumbled. Mira laughed, poked with a finger, told me not to worry. "I'm not. It's just a bit unsettling. Is he attracted to you?"

"No, he knows we can only be friends."

"Ahh, youth. You think that stops feelings?"

"Who you calling youth?"

"You. Youth."

She poked again, harder, and we laughed and walked off into cold air.

It'd become deep night, but Mira and I were never far from a glowing - not in the shops of Cambridge, but between the two of us.

The air was icy, almost windless as we walked back to the trolley-station.

A gust came, pushed at us, but no snow rose from ground or snow-bound cars, no flakes flew about street lights. No cars moved in street - no passers-by.

Silent world to ourselves - crossed esplanades of snow, passed walls of buildings, shop-windows dark, doors - above, apartments lit through shades. There was no time but within us, for we were all that moved.

I was glad Jeremiah'd gone - no brightness.

We walked until the "T." I could barely feel the token, but we ran - before long, came - gliding oblong, light streaming from windows, flowing along platform toward us.

We sat - car hummed forward - put my arm round her, leaned heads together, felt fingers slowly run over nape of my neck. We sat silent, in touch, car clicked over rails, passengers swayed, my hands came alive in grid-warmed air.

Our stop - walked into cold darkness - headed to video store - we'd resolved to watch each other's cardinal movies - in, under bright fluorescents - she to comedy, I foreign - met, under minute, at register - Mira produced member-card - I tossed few bills - clerk handed plastic bag - walked out - her choice, Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* - mine, Ken Russell's *Women in Love*.

She slipped arm in mine, pressed me - I swung bag to and fro with free hand. Slightest edge of nerves - part Jeremiah, part Darin.

Still air - tried to breathe deeper. We said little. We thought our thoughts, walked through snow, smiled.

Now we could be silent, walk under trees under black sky.

I breathed easier. I felt back with the good things. My unsettledness floated away toward the stars.

❧

We walked round her building-corner, mail, then in, upstairs, down hall, apartment - dry steam-heat air - few steps - Christmas-lights.

Coats off - snuggle on couch - chests pressed through shirts, heads close, hands intertwining - hearts faster.

I looked, restless, round, at light on wood floor. A want stirred. I told

Mira she'd to see something. She smiled, eyebrows rising.

I reached behind chair, pulled out videotape - returned to couch, she laid head on my shoulder - titles rolled - *Horowitz Plays Rachmaninoff* - video I'd found - *Piano Concerto No. 3*, from 1978 - saw her eyes widen, her face turn toward me. She kissed my lips gently.

As the piece went its strange places, I felt electricity. I felt communion with thrust-of-life of composer, performer, piece, human impulse to art. We rose on a golden spike of energy.

When done, we embraced, stayed for a long time. "Something else for you to see," I said, into her hair, "if you're up for it."

"Oh?" she said. "What's that?"

I put in another, screen crackled with video-lines, then smoothed, then odd sudden opening on detail-crowded 1920 English living room, mother of house fussing at something, father hammering at little woodwork-art. "Ms Graham," I said, gestured toward screen, "meet Mr Lawrence. It's *Women in Love*, darling."

As it began, she seemed highly concentrated, head erect, unmoving. I couldn't feel her.

In one scene, protagonist and his love quarrel in a wood. They insult one another, hector, snap. Ursula runs off, seeming forever. In a minute, she returns. She lays a flower in his hand, he kisses her forehead, unutterably tender. She looks up, love shining, says, "Did I abuse you?" "Wait," says he, in touch with his depths. "I shall have my own back." They go off to his little cottage, go inside and speak of never growing apart: for the way was cleared.

I sat beside her, tears running down my face.

The pure idyll doesn't last - trouble comes, but hope behind it, in creative tension between them. I looked over as credits rolled. "What did you think?"

She cocked her head, then shook it. "I'll have to think about this one," she said. "Cryptic actions of unknowable people."

She said nothing more.

I felt a bit flat.

Then, reminded myself - I hadn't liked it at all, first view.

Still, she hung back. I felt she'd judged it less than sterling, almost as

if she'd judged me, directly, inhuman.

I thought of the Citylighters.

After a moment I upbraided myself.

Was creative difference, and tension of it, not how Ursula and Birkin'd grown, and found their way?

11 February 2001.

Three hours'd passed - we'd spoken of art, culture, our lives, how they all twined together - it'd been intimate as being alone, expanded to an inspiring, unfailing other. By 2am, we'd reached easy quiet.

I stood up, stretched, looked at her. "Time," I said, "to call Gabrielle and see how it went with Darin."

Stomach aflutter, I dialed. I'd returned to couch when she answered. After I'd told of Mira-and-me for few minutes, she told of night before.

She'd run down Geary, met Darin at Royal Ground. He was non-exclusive too, mid-thirties, married, wife living on East Coast just then. It'd gotten late, they'd walked to "26's", ate sushi maki and sashimi, drank beers, talked until closing. He'd asked if he could come home with her, they'd walked to our apartment, then inside, lain in bed, kissed for a while, then gone to sleep holding each other.

Some moments, my stomach'd tightened. I feared she'd leave me. I could see the places they'd gone - imagined their looking into each other's eyes, holding hands, lips touching. That brought no fear. But the other-world of feelings, internality of their attraction, was more real to me - and in that I'd no part. It made me freeze.

I told myself to breathe, to remember Gabrielle's ease about Mira. This was same, I told self: threatless. I enjoined myself to bring shoulders down, breathe through tightness. I listened to her - tension broke up.

When she was done, I told my fears. She laughed, spoke urgently of our love, said it was an addition, not loss - just as Mira'd been.

I told her in detail what'd happened since we'd last talked. After a while, Mira pried handset, declared she was taking good care of me and I was doing okay taking care of her. She ignored my tickles, asked more about Darin.

After few minutes, Mira said she was very tired, they said goodnight - loving tone surprised me - Gabrielle and I said we loved each other, promised talk next day, goodnight'd.

I hung up, grinned, buoyant. I sing-songed "Gabrielle's got a boy-y, Gabrielle's got a boy-y." Mira sang back, "So have I-i, so have I-i." We wagged our heads like ninnies.

I intoned, "C'mere, you," beckoning. Mira leaped, saying "Willingly!"

I spaced a few kisses across her forehead and other nice places.

"You know," I said, between, "- if Jocelyn - could see us now - she'd die ..."

"Yes!" she said. "The evil Michael, exploiting the poor Mira." She shook her finger an inch from my nose. "Bad Michael. Very bad." I stretched out, pulled her partway on top of me. "Yes," I said. "Such horrible exploitation." Her nose was buried near my ear. I took "Mmmph" to mean assent.

I yawned. We pulled back our heads, said "Bed" in unison - got up, walked to her room.

I loved our being carried there on humor.

We were dropping clothes to floor - I said, "So, boys are trouble, are they?"

"Yes, you most emphatically are."

"And what did we ever do to you, hmm?"

We stopped, looked at each other.

"That hardly bears repeating, sir."

"Well, substantiate your case. A familiar phrase. Anything to do with a warm body who shared this comfy bed?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Continue."

Her face changed. There was conflict. "Well ... look, it was Harris."

It took a moment to register. Her friend - the warm body. I'd thought them separate people.

"Okay."

"We did have sex. It was - not good."

"The sex?"

"Yeah, we weren't compatible."

"I'm sorry. What happened?"

"Well, he's an Objectivist, pretty much. And there's just a connection problem with those men. I swore, after Taylor, never again. I should've stuck to it."

"You'd good sex with Taylor, though."

"Yeah, Taylor and I fit somehow. Maybe despite."

"Why do all these Rand-men fall in love with you?"

She turned still, looking at a room-corner. I felt suddenly she was seeing a vast inner landscape. "Because I can do everything they can, and can do more."

I saw it - well-lit, trimmed circle of Rand-rationality - dark woods surrounding, wider and further-back than clearing - fugitive images, her owls and rooks flying, creatures springing, all rustling in darkness - her, free to pass through all sectors.

I heard, as if in my ear, Goethe's words about creativity: "It is the daemonic something which reason and intelligence cannot account for. The daemonic manifests itself as absolutely positive energy. It likes to attach itself to outstanding personalities."

I felt she was one of them. I wondered if I could keep up. It felt a challenge worth answering. I was eager to meet it.

I looked at her, let myself know it fully: she was beautiful. "Come to bed with me, fae girl," I said, "and hold me tight."

We took off pants, I removed shirt while she kept hers - climbed into bed, Mira clicked off light, and we lay there, a warm breathing bundle of happiness.

"You don't mind," I said suddenly, "I'm not an Objecto-boy? I could get stiff and talk respectfully about the stock-market. If that'd help."

In the darkness she couldn't see my smile. "You, my dear dork," she said, "are no Objecto-boy. You are a man."

"An old one."

"Shut up and kiss me, old-timer."

Springtime flowered again.

We lay, stroking fingertips on each other's sides, when Mira abruptly sat up and twisted at her trunk. I heard rustling.

She threw something - fell to floor. Her shoulder brushed mine as she turned - over my arm warmth of her bare breast, impossible tingle of her nipple - my arms round her, under my hands and forearms skin of her back, shoulder resting on mine, hands at my back.

"Better," she sighed.

"I could not agree more."

We rested in silence, held each other close, snuggled close; after few minutes kisses were broken by yawns. We turned to mold together.

In time, she drifted off, body unconscious-dancing, and I kept the watch.

I thought less than night before. I lay there, flew through the landscape of our history, alit in favorite places.

When the odyssey reached its end and beginning in the moment of touch, it was nearly morning, and I slept.

I swam up toward light as if from a pond-bottom. The way was cloudy, but I stroked fluid with my hands and kicked away from dark below. I broke surface, face down in the pillow, reached for Mira. She wasn't there. I opened my eyes.

She'd already pulled on pants and shirt.

"Good morning, love," I said. "Good morning," she said, not meeting my eyes.

I sat up in bed, wrapped forearms around knees, and we talked. She'd woken up overwhelmed by our intimacy. Part of her wanted to run; she declared she wouldn't. She felt caution-impulses; she'd fight them. Was this not about expansion?

I felt as when she'd gotten her ballet evaluation. I rose, hugged, put on shirt saying since no class today we should leave town, get some free air. She mused over interesting places to go by public transit. I pshaw'd, said we'd rent a car, do it in style.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"Anywhere. Let's just go!"

"Alright! You go shower - I'll email Andrea her update."

Gabrielle and Mira greeted on ICQ - Gabrielle'd done *I Ching* reading on us three, called it amazing - sent Mira text and accompanying picture, bade us look.

Mira: Yes, of course!! I will look as soon as I finish this email.

Gabrielle felt fluxy about future - weather'd been stormy and rainy since I'd left - Darin was coming over that evening and she felt an odd-

ness about him - she wasn't able to be completely excited, as if he held back from her, wouldn't reveal all he could. When she'd touched his body, it'd felt abandoned somehow.

Gabrielle: It didn't have the abundant life flowing through it like Michael has

Mira pantomimed a "hmmm" and hug, suggested perhaps they simply needed some time.

Gabrielle: Well, we'll see what happens ... How are you doing? I know Michael is in ecstatic worlds being with you ... is it the same for you? :)

Yes, said Mira, mostly. She spoke of overwhelm, of desiring to run (Gabrielle interjected, smiling, that she knew that feeling), though she didn't think it'd happen.

I walked in toweling hair - Mira was up from computer - "I'm going to shower now," she said. "Talk to the Gabrielle-girl! Oh!" - she opened a window, pointed - "Look what she came up with on *I Ching* for the three of us!"

She flounced out - I looked at a drawing before me.

Beneath a blue sky were two women in flowing almost-classical dress, close together atop a grassy promontory overlooking the sea. A pure stream flowed through grasses before them, reflecting sky. A deer and raccoon sipped from it, and a squirrel ate from one girl's hand; the other girl petted one of two fawns nestled close to her. Far beyond, in background, snow-capped peaks of stony mountain range going off to sea. The first girl was laying on her stomach; the second girl was crouched.

Gabrielle's question: "What is next for Michael, Mira, and me?" The answer praised the innocence of natural harmlessness, openness, purity of intention.

Those who possess a pure heart are best guided by their instincts and intuition. Thinking too much severs the link with the heart. Be wary of courses of action that require too much cleverness.

The most specific advice, it continued, was contained in changing line four:

Remember that if something truly belongs to or with you, it cannot be taken from you. Let go of it and it will naturally return to you. Similarly, as long as you are true to yourself, and listen to your intuition, you can make no mistakes. The Future hexagram that this reading changes into is called 'Increase.'

We greeted - she felt up and down, she said, out of contact with her center - I told of Mira's wrestlings - I felt simple, at peace - couldn't wait to hold her - her self was clearer to me - all this could be another step to demolishing every block in our way. She said I was making her cry. After time, she spoke of her inability to be fully excited about Darin. We talked a few minutes more about him.

Gabrielle: I just never want you and me to grow less intense ...

And Mira's 'net connection dropped. In San Francisco, Gabrielle typed words I wouldn't read until months later.

Gabrielle: I won't take that as a sign ;) Hahaha!

In Boston I laughed, finished toweling off, then dressed.

Minutes later, Mira and I were standing by dining-table, Yellow Pages open in window-light - candles - tall, thin, wicks almost uncharred - sent shadows across page - we'd found car rental place, taxi company to get there.

"So where," she said, "exactly are we off to?"

I looked at window by couch - sky of snow-day light.

"North," I said. "Further up. What would you think of spending the night on the road?"

"I like it. Yes!"

"We may find a bed-and-breakfast," I said.

She smiled. "Sounds wonderful. I'll pack a few things." She walked off. I shook away thoughts of making love.

I picked up my poetry book from beside bed, clothes-change from duffels - we were ready.

The cab pulled into parking lot - saw little strip mall was abandoned. Confused, stopped a little, we talked of the oddness.

We got out, he opened trunk, set bags on ground with expression that could've been annoyance, drove away.

We walked, aimless, before empty storefronts. She peered in window; I hung back, looked up at oblongs where store-signs'd been.

After few minutes, we blew away the vagues: she spotted phone down-street, I stood guard at bags while she nipped over.

She returned few minutes later with corrected address, and she'd called cab back.

Wind brushed us as we went to look.

The Jeep wagon stood at lot-corner, facing frontage road. Silver chassis, four-door, ski rack, high off ground with snow-grip tires. Sleek, tough.

"Sold," I said.

We went back in, signed papers, and for $75 daily it was ours.

I turned key, engine blew live, radio screamed. We jumped - our fingers collided by the volume knob.

I drove off fast. We bounced onto street and laughed, in few minutes reached highway. We sped on with a low underthrum toward horizon under grey skies, along cut-slopes through hills with white wings of snow on either side.

We flashed along, by trees - one stand leafless, bare branches swept against clouds - then copseful of pines - needley, solid, rich-green.

Our hands found one another across divider and clasped.

I looked at her legs.

They were folded at angles atop the leather. Taut-jeaned, they spoke to me. My eyes traced slenderness by her ankles, up her calves, up the compact swell in power of her thighs, muscular and lean, up to her hips, most-womanly of all her body. Further than this her dark jacket fell and I could see no more.

I was drawn to her legs. It was desire - but my body remained at rest; energy in my eyes.

I put hand on her left thigh. Warmth went into my palm, my mind. I felt wholer with her. She put her hand on top of mine and pressed my fingers down.

A few minutes later, I knew a moment had come. I pulled soiled cassette from in my coat, put it in-deck.

Tape noise cleared to man's voice in an echoing hall. Applause, then silence, then my first time playing for an audience - concert in the Academy gymnasium.

Her eyes widened. She sank back in seat, looked out window, listened to Beethoven. She glanced at me admiringly several times.

She clapped with audience of almost eighteen years before. All quieted for my transcription of a Bach organ toccata. As octaves came in at end, a woman in the audience'd gasped. I'd felt a rush. Years later, I felt its reflection.

Mira applauded as I put in pocket. She asked when I'd started, called it remarkable. I told of my grandfather's self-taught playing. She said it was all amazing, looked out window again.

We drove on, past plowed snow-piles, thick bands of trees above them, and - every so often - pine-stands pointing up, dark and different against the sky.

"Where are we going?" said Mira. Her voice sounded as natural as air. Suddenly we were outside time again. I looked west, sun behind clouds, then I looked east.

"To the sea," I said. "We're going to walk by the sea."

The white hills grew as we drove on. Long forest-fronts thinned slightly, occasional rock outcrops near highway paler, smoother. The horizon widened as land between the hills flattened - I imagined rain and sea mixing in eastward grasslands, flowing in over road during storms.

A large sign came up, then passed behind - New Hampshire.

Western clouds were parting. Beams of gold fell through cloud-gaps, to unseen places of earth, beyond the trees or road-curving horizon.

We got off on a smaller road. We passed through quiet New England towns - signs said "Hampton Falls" and "Elmwood Corners." The beams gained faintest orange, falling in front of us as clouds cleared.

Now forest passed on either side, tall and solemn - then gone, and the road, still flat, ran atop earth levee across marsh - tidal flats of tall grasses, rich clayish soil, to right creek winding through, reflecting greyed yellow-white of clouds - row of houses on the creek's other side, beams fell on marsh and houses alike - to south, a wide sky-prospect above, dark as if light'd slipped off the house-tops and fallen away into space.

Immensity touched timelessness. We'd followed no map or person's word. We'd wished the sea, and now we ran along with sunbeams to east, to the unknown shore.

We rode over marsh toward its end - a clean line of houses in light - our shadow ahead of us on the road, foretaste of evening - horizon flattening - colors going pale - this, I thought, is the last town before the sea.

Earth rose up, road ran flush ahead - we passed out into block after block of houses and hotels - endless hotels strung through a deserted-seeming town - lit in near-sunset - parked cars few - doors and windows boarded for season.

The road - one-way in town - had buildings close-by, short-curbed - so it seemed to extend the foundations - level channel between two long walls - sole openings were side-street flashes.

I gradually slowed to town speed - snow and road dirt rose in air, wind-whipped - yellowing light reflected from walls, down dimly around corners.

Then ahead, an ending - a crossing-road - above it some sort of railing

- then sky above, dark with hanging cloud-front.

We pulled into parking space. I keyed off, was readying to get out when she said, "Could we stay a moment?" We half-turned to one another, joined hands.

She pulled a cassette from her jacket - pressed "play" - we sat, silent - her thumb pressed the bridge between my thumb and index finger - Nigel Kennedy began motoric version of Hendrix's "Little Wing" - this was, she said, for choreography debut.

We turned, looked past railing - watched sand blow in small whirls, fly apart seconds later - music edged through strange tonalities, timbres - violin sawed to violent climax - seconds after, flock of gulls blew up - swirled in ball over beach, shot left, toward curving rocky point at beach-end to north - music ended.

She packed cassette away. We opened doors, and the first inch brought frigid knives. I got down and grit went in my eye as I shut door. Mira staggered on snow-hillock. Wind whistled among western buildings. I keyed doors locked and we looked forward.

There, in sinking sunlight, was a tall granite statue. It was a woman, facing away from us. We began to walk in wind. To left, nothing but sky over railings - to right, two slim flagpoles, empty. She rose into air on a square concrete platform.

A stone crescent curved in front, columns of names carved. We stepped onto sidewalk, drew close. Mira ran gloved finger over some letters. I wondered how they'd come to be written here.

We raised our eyes, looked out with her.

Under the sky, at the end of sand, was the sea, the dark sea at last. It was breaking slowly, sluggish. Beyond the breakers, roiled water out to the horizon.

We walked right, stepped on platform through rail-gap, stood before her side.

Her pedestal was four telescoping stone rings - above topmost, hewn, a rocky promontory. She was atop it, her right knee raised, heel arched - only toe-tips touched rock. Ready to rise up.

She leaned forward slightly. Her garb was simple cloth wrap, middle up to shoulders then down arms - further veiling across shoulders and

bust - long flowing skirt - something in hand, other side of lap - couldn't quite see, for snow.

Mira walked to face her, and looked up. I looked down, to the base. Lowest ring - incised trough cut into it - layer of soil, blown near-free of snow, cracked and parched, as dry in winter as it'd've been in desert - stubs of flower-bushes shook in wind - in summer, a planter.

There were capitals cut into second-highest ring - I walked round, read - "Breathe soft, ye winds" - a pair of stars - "Ye waves in silence rest" - final star-pair.

Mira was still facing her. I walked, stood beside, looked up.

The wind hit my face. The woman's head - lifted lightly in air. Unmoving attention, faintest hope behind features. Her left foot on rock, thigh straight toward horizon - ready to walk.

Carved waves like bunched acanthi lapped at promontory. She leaned, as if listening with body - waited, in pure awareness, for what might or might not come.

She was holding a laurel garland, full-circle.

Small capitals, second-lowest ring. I brushed wind-pressed snow away with my shoe's toe.

NEW HAMPSHIRE
MARINE MEMORIAL

Below was cut name of she who'd designed it, and date of its dedication.

Mira read. We looked up again. "She's waiting -" I said. "- for them," said Mira.

There was no tragedy in the woman's face. There was acceptance.

I looked at the wreath. It rested, a bit heavy, on her left knee, almost slipping into waves. Still, she held on, a little weary. She hadn't cast it upon the waters.

All wasn't ended.

We walked round again, took in every detail in failing light, then went out onto sand, toward the sea.

Sand blew from drifts, hissed on our clothes. I realized I couldn't feel

my ears or nose. Mira picked her way along. She looked, grinned, beams catching cheeks, hairs blown free, glints in her eye.

She yelled, "I love you!" I yelled it back. We stumbled awkwardly to one another, hugged fierce, walking down, wind shoving us forward, firm hand to our backs.

The waves came in, narrowly foaming but pressed down, kept low - beyond them, unbreaking sea-waves, heaving but depressed too, almost void of whitecap.

Between us and the breakers was something I'd never seen: the sea, frozen. The very lip of sea, where it thinned, sand-emerge from brine, was ice. Not ice of snow - none near - or snow-melt - no channels from uphill drifts - but sea itself, frozen in bitter cold.

We drew close, in wonder. We crossed onto the ice, walked forth, crackling lightly, looking down into still water. Sand particles seemed magnified, and little floods came from waves - then reversed, dripping back into sea.

We looked at each other, lips parted. Then we advanced, crunching down now, shattering. Saw plant life in water below. How could green plant be there? But it was - alive somehow, or preserved.

"This place," I said, "must be incredible in summer." She shook her head. I knew she meant nothing but wonder and yes.

We cracked across, splits radiating. The wind went down. We could hear breakers, then it rose and drowned them out. We looked at each other, jerked heads toward the road.

We turned uphill.

Wind was pain at my front - grit-cloud blew - in both eyes - slowed pace, turned head until tears washed - blew off - wondered if they'd reach sea.

I turned forward, raised head.

Sun'd fallen closer to the horizon. Wind roared as if vomited, howling, straight from its heart. Mira stood straight, unbowed, directly between me and its disk.

It lined her in flared orange-red. It was a moment I'd waited for. I just hadn't known it.

I stopped walking without realizing it.

She took step after step, firmly - stumbled now and then, never fell, never let herself slow.

Silently, I spoke.

You do not know this - I don't have words for it, not this - but I am with you, and will be with you - if I died now, if I dropped to earth and your face was the last I saw, I've known this - this was enough - I'll be true to you, for all my life - I'll walk into the light with you, beautiful being …

I walked again, caught up with her.

We crossed to statue, tacking against the wind.

She met us, who'd looked out for nearly half a century.

In passing I looked at her face, hair swept back in braided bun.

I realized in small shock.

She and Mira looked akin.

They could have been sisters.

We ran to Jeep, got in hurriedly, slammed doors - I keyed engine, gunned it, hands at vents, good pain.

Mira looked in the statue's direction.

"That," she said, "was incredible."

"How did we find all this?" I said.

We turned to each other. She looked at me - no play at all - her eyes wide, chin a touch lowered again - her face deeply serious. I loved this in her most of all.

Our eyes locked.

Suddenly there was nothing at all. Nothing. Time ended.

She spoke, each word falling into a new world.

"I felt you, dearest."

We both looked into each other, sudden strangers - seized each other - lips met - warm moistness, life against cold, against time we'd spent apart - tasted tongues, lips sang, touched fingertips to each other's faces - felt still-cold patches, burning warmth - could not tell which of us was cold or hot or where.

It was a seal upon this place, all we'd experienced.

I looked in her eyes, wondered if she'd ever know all I felt - hoped she

would, all at once - and never, so she'd know the inexhaustible.

We kissed softly, parted, leaning back. We were breathing quickly.

We sat for a time.

I looked toward the point where gulls'd flown.

"I think we should go further up," I said.

Mira nodded.

"North," she said.

I set us in reverse, pulled out.

We stopped at corner, looked right.

The woman looked out to sea for the lost souls.

We turned, and drove on.

Past a landward row of hotels and shops - on other side, dark sea - finally, came the houses of men. They had widow's walks looking over the road. I saw, flanking the widow's walks, dormer windows - lit lamps behind curtains.

The road swerved in - passed sea-hiding mount with houses clustered up it - ran by waves again for a time. The next point, northeast, hovered across beach.

Road hugged point's sea-side - banked curve - beach dropped away, Jeep leaned - I braked - large estates passed above - broad houses, back from road, gabled - open to ice-fields that'd been green lawns - spring, would again.

We rose, turned at point's tip - flipped on running lights - swept north up-road - freshwater ponds, roads, houses - some new, few positively modernist.

In falling light trees were going near-black - at turn, down through some, blue-white crest-tips on long wave-lines coming to shore.

In time, a wide curve - no lights, bridge over dark water - time for another direction - no restaurant or bed-and-breakfast near - turned round at bridge's far side, drove back as we'd come, south 'til lights again, wide drag to right - sign read "Cable Road."

We turned right - fading yellow-and-teal smears at horizon - rode

about exploring back roads for a while, horizon-light only compass. We swung through houses and forests, all dark - came upon a broad asphalt - turned left - more woods, provision-stop at convenience store, turns, then on highway again.

We merged - river of yellow-white lights in opposite - when we reached speed, rippling becalmed lake of red lights in ours. Motor roared up - Mira turned on radio, found pop-music. We listened, the boys sang their depressed sincerity clear and true, and miles passed swiftly.

On a random offshoot, continued - about ten minutes, town lights, rising in sky - I took exit. As we passed below lit-up arch with town-name I laughed.

I reached back, put duffel in her lap, told her to pull out book - she opened - *Collected Poems* - Robert Coffin - told her I'd planned to read to her in bed - no idea we'd be in town, but it'd been his - he'd lived there.

Mira threw hands up, laughed, said it was all clearly meant to be.

Shops scattered about a neighborhood - looked promising. I pulled off and parked.

Out into still air, we sidewalk'd downhill, hands in coats, looking for food and bed.

Before long, savory smells from warm-dark lit inside of restaurant. Menu posted under glass showed steaks and fish and ales.

We walked in.

We followed her - past diners - wooden tables, candles in little jars - dance floor - behind, empty band stage - chest-level divider - table toward rear - she hoped we enjoyed.

Stage-light colors over Mira's face - I was held by the beauty - wondered when they played. Would she dance? Would I do well? Soon, basket of bread and butter, bowls of steaming soup, salad on plates, courses of meat and fish.

We talked of happy small things. I looked around. We were explorers. People'd no idea who we were, what we'd done. Delicate colors moved in her hair. I felt pride - this hour, this day, bringing food to her.

Sweet dessert came, with hot coffee. We ate, drank, held hands, smiled. When it came I signed the credit-slip. We got coats from the two empty chairs, walked past podium, said goodnight to greeter.

It was colder and we walked fast. Stars twinkled in dark folds of space. I was tired, horizons faintly contracted. Crest I'd ridden was troughing. My reserves were low. I thought of finding warm place to rest. Perhaps we'd find our sensual way further yet.

We got in Jeep. I looked at her. "Where next, do you intuit?" She looked out, then half-turned back, face troubled. "I think I'd like to go home. I want to sleep in my own bed tonight." Her voice softer than usual.

"How come?"

"It's dark out, and cold, and I'm worried we won't find a good place to stay."

We talked a bit. She touted her nice mattress, vowed to rub my back. I yielded, slightly puzzled, said I'd not come between girl and her bed. I pulled out to right, accelerated down one-way.

Mira put hand to mouth, looked at me from corners of eyes. "You've had no problem keeping me from sleep the past two nights."

"Hey! We had things to do."

"My love, that is always true of us."

She was smiling behind hand. Tiredness no more. I pulled onto secondary road south, and we play-fought like kittens.

About forty-five minutes in, she yawned. She leaned in, cozied to my arm, face in delicate panel-light, tranquil. I pressed knee to steering wheel, left hand slowly turned down radio.

I sat up straight, girl breathing long breaths on my arm, and thought. Minutes later, sign, in darkness - the road we'd taken, to sea.

A few minutes later, in Massachusetts.

The moon glowed behind her building. Few lights on as we crunched with

stars overhead to door.

We swayed up stairs - duffels behind chair - to her room - lay down atop blanket - legs and arms cinched - my hand went to small of her back, fingers between muscles - we smiled, lips met - stretched together, laughed at timing, looked silently into one another.

She reached out fingers slowly, as if across great space, rested tips on my cheek. "You," she said, "mean so much to me."

"I've only had days like these with you," I said. "Like all problems are solved."

Her pupils expanded. She nodded, shadow across her face from my own. "Here," she said. "Lay on my other side so I can get your back." I tightened arms, rolled us both over. I released, flipped over, faced wall. "Shirt, please," she said. I got it off, lay down, slight shiver of less than fully clothed.

She pressed fingers, palms, in, touch like our first words: direct, probing, finding - body-feelings rose, moved through - her hands followed, accurate.

I turned my head back. "You feel the energy, don't you?" Steady answer: "I've done energy-work before." My back loosened. Little pains of emotion rose and dissipated. Time faded.

She softened and yawned. I turned over, kissed her nose, thanked. She welcomed, then - sleepy - wished me sweet dreams. Her hand took mine, squeezed, almost immediately first stages of sleep. Small tremors arced. I turned, looked out at floor, cold-moon-lit.

I breathed deeply, feeling solitude.

I didn't know how long I'd be awake, but this was enough.

My mind drifted across day, exhaustion pulling down.

A day, I thought, to remember - life is short, and -

Suddenly I stiffened in horror.

My muscles froze.

Breath stopped.

Frozen awareness had taken me.

One day I'll be dead.

I lay beside her, locked in absolute, silent terror.

Everything would go.

The day we'd had - every before, every after - sight, skin, touch, love - challenge, defeat, triumph - what had been, what would be - even loss, lost - gone - never to feel again.

Heart hammered - I looked at room - moonlight on floor, all as it'd been - yet horror - "The moon won't help me," I thought, dislocated - she slept, peaceful by me - mustn't wake - I stayed silent.

Thought of spring - air, sun, rain showers, things growing - touched her wrist - life in her, so much like mine - tried, all my might, to feel it - reminded myself I wasn't dying, not yet - still had time - each helped, but been thrown too far - couldn't get back - could only accept ugliness of present - wait for the turn - know that it'd pass.

I lay, impaled, for hours - thought of my life, all I'd done and failed to do - thought of the things that'd simply come, and what hadn't come - things that couldn't be compelled - thought of those with whom there'd been love - traced patterns of what'd worked, what hadn't - thought of Gabrielle - what'd her day been? - had she seen Darin?

There were little stars out window - moon rays on floor-spots - saw no motion, even with fixed looking - could only see small alignments, look away, then later, by markers, know change.

I held mind focused - didn't evade - faced it - as hours passed terror left in little streams - as if cracking - slowly melting - dripping back into sea.

It was gone.

I was suspended in neutral, halfway back.

Dawn was rising.

The feeling of unfeeling ended in a few hours of restless sleep.

❧

I awoke. Mira was beside me, stretching up.

I felt better - she smiled, ruffled my hair.

We rolled from bed, readied - my horizon was here-and-now - showered - clean clothes - yesterday's behind easy chair - hoped she didn't

think me slob - downstairs - Jeep on snow - white sun - clambered up - downtown - parked side-street, crossed cobbles - signed - she ran down as I walked up - sat, slightly blank, outside Four.

Dancers walked in - exchanged smile with one, stomach fluttered - class began - at break, students walked, drank - some looked at me, recognizing, brief-curious - Mira exited, swallowed pills - I looked at her ankles, feet - hoped it wouldn't permanently injure.

I watched her shoulders as she swept through paces - saw moles on her back - made note she'd them checked - realized was thinking of her health in coming decades - felt natural.

Class-ended, she lingered talking to mistress - they walked to door - I stood - they stopped - teacher looked me up and down.

"Madame," Mira said, nervous, rocking upward on feet, "this is my friend Michael Brown. Michael - Madame Legat." She removed hand from hip, put it out. "Well. Hello," arching brow, Russian-brusque, as we shook. "Glad you're here."

We talked for a half-minute, Mira looking back and forth between us.

She went back in studio, Mira told what morning held. I'd be here to see it, and learn more of my love's strange art.

❧

Early afternoon, done. She came into lobby, we met at Security-desk, walked out.

We drove - street-warrens - mullioned windows - brick - snow-clots against red walls - each expressed hunger - she suggested Chinatown - turned from Charles to Boylston to Essex - parked.

Walked in light wind - past knickknack store window - blue-and-white ceramic bowls, little glass dragons in red-and-gold - came upon restaurant - red letters over door - Chau Chow City.

Old lady in tight silk coat - she explained carefully - several Chau Chow City restaurant-floors here - mostly seafood, but up top they were serving fresh dim sum. Mira and I looked at each other, smiled, elected to rise.

We walked into large, almost empty dining room - white-jacketed

waiter gestured to floor - small intimate tables for two and four, further off - closer, big round tables with groups and single-diners sitting together, strangers brought to talk and eat.

"Table, please," I said, pointing at one under white curtains - filtered lacy-white afternoon light - moment I'd raised finger I'd known, warmly, she'd want to be with people - "Oh, no, here," she said, excited, pointing to side-by-side chairs at communal table closest to door.

"Okay," I said, smiling to myself. As we sat, I considered. When Beth and I'd gone out, she'd sought most-private tables - sourness'd grown in her over years - hadn't wanted near people. But Mira brightly wanted to be among fortune-washed - reflex kicked briefly - didn't she want us to be alone? - then no more - liked she'd broken me from an oldness.

Dim sum new to her - told its workings - we ordered tea - talked - waited for servers to begin with little carts - asked what was - chose small plate after small plate - split large ones - talked of tastes, textures - heightened sensuousness - no trumpets hailing - just all well with world - we in moment, tasting avidly together - ate a few too many small plates - listened to table-mates talking - friends and strangers - poured tea for each other - when time came, waiter picked up little ticket, counted small stamps servers'd left, he scribbled total.

Soon we were downstairs, out into afternoon.

We drove home, went straight to room, wanting to cuddle - divested coats, keys, pocket-things, jumped in bed. Sun heading west - window-patterns on walls and bed - held each other among slow-moving shapes light and dark.

Mira nipped me with a kiss.

"I do love you, Michael Brown. There is so much. And more to come - much more."

I joined my hand with hers.

"Ever read Goethe's *Faust*?" I said. "Second part's more interesting - no one reads it. Anyway - Faust's soul in exchange for reaching the moment he can say, 'This is it. It's enough.'" I squeezed her hand, raised up

our fingers. "Those are moments I have with you. That's what I find with you. That's why I'm here."

Her eyes widened as I neared end - she put her head over my heart, said, "I'm in love you with you. So very much. Completely so." - raised her head, kissed me. Our arms slid tighter, our mouths opened. I closed my eyes.

My hand pressed down her back, across small. I traced fine muscle-lines further, over taut curves down to her haunches, backs of her thighs, then up again, lingering as I'd never with her, squeezing, feeling fitness of this living being to the art she'd chosen.

Her hands pressed into my body, kisses more passioned, driven.

Breath rushed out our noses. Distant thought of horses. She pulled her head back slightly, sucked at my tongue. I kissed deeply in her mouth, advancing. She didn't pull back. The carefulness that'd come with our first words began to slip away.

I felt bravery flooding us.

After time without time, we pulled away a few inches. We lay, breathing deeply, opened eyes, looked into the other's, touches on each other still vivid, eyes still burning.

"Good time to stop," she said, took a breath.

"Yes, good time. Yes."

"Wow," she said, face serious. "Okay, wow."

I looked at her, grinning. "Not bad, eh?" She half-smiled, swatted my hand. "Stellar," she said, "more like."

Motor-impulse to get up, broaden things.

"Darling, I'm going to give Gabrielle a call. Haven't talked to her in a day, and it'll be good to get away from our bower here for a few minutes."

Mira gave me handset - I walked to living room - stood by table - dialed toll-free at Gabrielle's work - asked for her - put through - heard her bright voice - said hello - she sounded joyous to hear me, almost crystalline.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm great!" She lowered her voice. "I - had a good night."

Brightness'd dimmed - slight reserve - not coldness - didn't want to hurt me - thought of only thing it could be.

"Did you and Darin make love last night?"

"Yes," she whispered, in relief.

A shock of excitement through me.

"Was it wonderful?"

"Yes!"

We spoke tenderly a few minutes, affirmed we were strong. Her voice was almost incredulous.

I felt well they'd crossed their boundary. No worry anymore.

We said goodbye.

I walked into Mira's room, lay down next to her.

"Well. I just talked to Gabrielle."

Her eyebrows rose.

"And?"

"She and Darin made love last night."

A look of shock passed over her face.

She smiled.

Our eyes met, we moved to one another, kissed deep.

Our eyes closed in same moment. Our arms clenched round one another. Our legs entwined again, tightly.

Unobstructed heat rose between us.

All barriers were gone.

We were hurtling upward.

Waves of sparkling thrills began to rise.

We breathed hungrily.

Her tongue passed my lips, pressed far.

I pressed back, she yielded, and I filled her mouth.

She gripped my shoulders, hard. I pulled her head closer, pressed hand over warm curve of her neck, shoulders, down her ribs, down flank to swell of her hip.

She pressed her hand from my shoulder to my chest, squeezing in muscle, her touch entered breath, held it tightened.

I felt her self, deeper yet.

We stopped, looked into each other's eyes. Energy rose and pulled us into itself. We kissed again, beginning to tremble.

She brought her other hand to my chest, squeezed above my heart. I brought mine together at base of her spine, slid under her shirt, up the ridge-muscles. I took bold pleasure in her skin, my wrists then forearms brushing her hips, fingers digging in as kisses grew more wanting.

We pulled away, matched eyes, breathing faster, shocked. We got off our shirts, then I undershirt and she bra. We lay back, grasped upper bodies together, almost desperate, hands sliding along each other's nude backs, lips locked, tongues shuttling between each other's mouths, hard-pressed between.

I held her breast, dipped my head, took her nipple in long kiss. The tingle in my lips spread across my face, into my head. I felt almost faint. All I thought was our union, in pleasure. She breathed out, her head went back, then forward, lips kissing my hair, along my ear, across my neck. I grasped her thigh in my hand, felt unconquerable life, the tight muscling by which she danced in the world. I moved my fingers to her inner thigh. Fire darted in my belly.

She pulled my face to hers. I bit softly along her tongue as it passed into my mouth. She took hold of my hip, pulled our lower bodies together. Desire flowed down my arms, I brought my palm up her thigh, up, until it could travel no further. I looked straight in her eyes as I closed my fingers on the taut, curved roundness in her jeans where her legs met. I pressed. I felt her moistness. She arched against my lips, my hands. I pressed tighter, moving thumb slightly, another wave lifted her, then she pulled her face away abruptly and looked, chin dropped, eyes dark.

The moment was here.

"My self-control," she said, "is at an end. This has to go further, or it has to stop - now." Time stopped and expanded. There was gracious eternity for me to consider all I needed to.

"I want to go further," I said, gentle, strong, "but only if it won't make us further apart."

She smiled. It was the smile of our first embrace.

"How," she said, "could it do anything but make us closer?"

The smile that spread across my face matched hers.

"Alright then," I said.

We sat straight, took off pants, then underwear, eyes bound. We lay down and slowly joined limbs. We looked into one another almost humbly, awkward in new touch of nudity. Yet somehow surer.

Our lips and tongues touched again, hands slid freely up and down each other's flanks. We covered each other in touch. I inhaled scent of her hair, her skin, felt our breaths and bodies shudder.

My mind fused all we'd felt since our beginning - I pulled back, said, "I want us to come together." Our eyes stayed tight, fearless. "For that to happen," she said, "I'll have to be on top."

I turned, lay flat. I looked up, saw her beautiful face, absolutely focused - behind it, art prints on her far wall. "Come to me," I said. She rose to her knees on the bed.

Sun streamed in from window, struck her light skin as she slipped one leg over my hips. She settled down on my legs, lowered both of her hands to my flanks. She pushed herself slowly forward, ran the moist inturned folds of skin between her legs over tip of quivering hardness that rose forth between mine, rose to meet her. She pulled back, slowly, then forth again.

As she pushed forward I raised my hips, to tighten. We both took in our breaths. A slight cloud came - deteriorated ugliness that'd begun my experience of sex. It was going as I looked up at her, felt our entering higher and higher purity - distance I'd come.

She leaned aside and reached her fingers down. As she gripped round my hardness, she smiled, almost embarrassed and shy, and said, with the most beautiful humor, "This is the part I never was very good at." Laughing new love went through me - she could be so unselfconscious, full of play even now.

She brought her moist, swollen lips to my moistened, risen hardness, she sank down as I raised hips to her, and we were complete. Our fit was tight, heated, full. We held still, looked at each other, bodies pulsing - then I took her hips in my palms and we began to move together slowly.

Time lengthened. Thought came, almost casual, she was a dancer, expressed with the body. I raised myself on my forearms a little, to bring our faces closer. I met every of her thrusts with my hips. We moved well,

slowly, bathed in the field that spread from our eyes, moved in absolute innocence, no part of us pushed off.

We moved thus for a long time. We were soaring over the foothills of a great range I wished to crest together. Time was not. We dwelt in a place where never'd been any care, any separation, any pain, were reaching the light. Close we came, close.

The light was merging into our bodies.

So close.

A change. Our ascent stopped. We seemed held from rising. A vapor of worry - but our eyes still met, intent, our bodies still moved seamlessly. We moved together thus for a very long time.

From time to time excitement rose, then returned to same level, as if something pushed down.

No matter. I looked into her eyes, said silently, "Can you hear my thoughts? Do you know how much I love you? How proud I am, that we're together like this?"

I felt excitement surging up in me, knew this time I'd not return to foothills. I wanted us to reach zenith together, but I felt no hint in her of a gathering.

I didn't want a pleasure she'd not feel.

So I didn't tighten as it began - didn't let myself be seized. I relaxed into it. I took breath into me and relaxed every muscle that was gripping into rising expansion.

I looked up to her and said, "I'm going to come." Her face did not change but for widening of her eyes.

And I completely relaxed into the final surge - and I came, my eyes locked with the sun-glinted eyes of my beloved.

We took in breath as one. My eyes struggled to close as my back arched, I felt fluent flow leave my body, enter hers - then my orgasm'd passed, so relaxed there'd been no climax-seize at all.

With great tenderness we embraced, held one another fast. I turned my head so it pressed to her chest. Her hand went into my hair and held me strong. I listened to her heartbeat.

Her unzenith weighed. I wanted us to have union, unbarred. On some level, I wanted her to release control, to give in, be swept away clean. I

looked into her eyes again.

"I want," I said, "to go down on you." She inhaled, nodded softly, leaned aside. As I got on my side, she faced far wall, then dropped back, head on pillows. I rose up on hands and knees over her.

I looked to her eyes, kissed her mouth, then down her body, driven, not lingering. I tasted her navel, tongue brushing piercing. I hiked myself down, felt my ankles pass bed-edge, then looked up. Her face was turned to one side, eyes closed, breath quick.

I dropped my head - was looking ahead, between her thighs. A bar of afternoon sun fell across her stomach and across the folds my hardness had passed within. The sun struck the pink upraised folds and they glowed. A small curling of blonde hair surrounded, and the wetness - ours - sparkled in light.

I'd never felt pulled to inspect intimate places of women's bodies, to shine the light of eyes between a lover's legs. Now, I did. And I found the same beauty I'd found in her mind. I knew I'd not look upon the body of woman the same way, ever again.

I moved toward her, joined my lips to her, tasted our wetness-mixed. Her hands dropped back of my head, ran through my hair, grasped me by the ears. She arched to me, and we began to move.

I heard her moan. It entered me. I gripped her hips hard. My lips and tongue took lives of their own, followed her energy, seeking release. Her hands tightened, moans deepened. It began to madden me. I moaned, then growled.

I didn't lose control. I drove it, hard-forward, timed to her, tried to get under her energy, lift it up. I loosed one hand, entered her with one finger, then two as I tasted higher, round the sensitive, circling. Her pleasure was mine. A last thought came: now she knew the other side of my love for her.

A change. Her moans didn't deepen. She rocked up to me, steadily. She gripped me, less tense. I remained for a long time, without increase.

Some time later, I knew this was wrong. Not simply a long road to pleasure. Something was actively blocking.

I drew fingers back, slowed tongue. I kissed, all over, tender. I rolled away from her legs, pulled myself up-bed, lay next to her.

She turned to me.

Our eyes met.

She looked as if, for first time, ground between us was uncertain.

"Love," I said, nervous, "- what's wrong?"

"I ... don't know," she said.

Her head was slightly pulled back.

Her eyes seemed harder. There wasn't the same light, the welcomed entry. Sudden remote.

I could not feel her. My breath tightened.

After two months of perfection, we couldn't be wrong here. "Oh no," small voices cried within me, "not this." I breathed against a locked-up stomach.

"Has sex been difficult?" I said.

"Yes. I haven't had an orgasm since December twenty-seventh."

"When you broke up with Taylor?"

She nodded.

I breathed more easily.

"Love, that's horrible, deprived like that. Why then?"

"I don't know. Things were wearing on me before we broke up, and they just - wore through the pleasure I took in sex."

I wondered if something less than full love-making'd be better. "Would you like to masturbate together?"

Her right shoulder rose and she said emphatically "No."

Shock of confusion. I wondered if my going first would be softer entry to pleasure.

"Would you like to watch me masturbate?" I said.

Of an instant her eyebrows contracted. Frowning, she pulled in her chin and said "No!"

She'd almost shouted.

{ *will be the undoing* }

I turned on my back, stared at ceiling. I'd no idea what she was feeling - for once did not care. I'd never accept sexuality as opposite world with stone rules.

"You seem pretty vehement," I said, not hiding irritation. "I just wanted us to be better."

She put her hand in mine, spoke of her frustration at her sex being off. I squeezed her hand. She did same. We lay, easier. She pulled her hand away - it moved in different directions over her chest, then joined other over sternum.

She looked at ceiling, shook head few times.

"We did it too soon." Voice fast, crisp, little clipped. "We shouldn't have gone so fast." I couldn't find our optimism, felt clumsy without it. "If it felt too soon for you," I said, "then it was."

She nodded briefly. She said nothing more.

I said, "What are you thinking?"

She exhaled, turned to me. "I think we need to put a cap on anything sexual for a while. It'll stop frustration and oddness. My relationship with Taylor must've affected me more strongly than I knew. I need to work on this."

"Mira, it's no problem. As long as we're fundamentally good, what does it matter? That's all that counts to me. Everything else we can work on."

She nodded, abstracted, then spoke suddenly. "Would you like to take a shower?"

I said sure.

She said she'd get towels. I was still held in strangeness of her asking this, when she returned. We put towels on, though roommate gone, went barefoot. We stepped into steam and nudity. We avoided eyes for a time, then looked silent, full into each other.

She wetted soap, washed me, eyes turned to where her palms met my body. I took soap, washed her shoulders, her breasts, down her sides, over her hips.

She swiveled, I washed up and down her back, down her legs in sunbeam water-splash.

It felt healing.

When done, we toweled - ourselves, each other - to her room - slipped

on clothes - Mira stretched - yawn prolonged it - I caught it - raised hand to mouth.

She suggested nap - I said it'd lovely sound - she hopped on bed - slid, as ever, to wall - I dropped, came to her - arms and legs twined - we sighed in satisfaction - rubbed noses.

She loved me, she said - don't worry - her sex impaired just then - with bit of work it'd be right - when back it'd be there, fully, for us - I knew, I said - wasn't worried - going to be wonderful, she said - I kissed her nose, said already was.

Sleep crept in.

My every night'd been restless.

That afternoon, I slept with her perfectly.

She stirred, or I - didn't know which - woke together - sunlight close to ceiling, darker-gold.

We stretched, lazy yet strong.

I began to smile.

"We did it," I said.

She laughed softly. "We really did."

Smiles grew, shoulders went up - looked at each other, sharing most perfect, delicious secret.

"Mira - we made love!"

"We did!" She bit her lower lip, daring. "And Michael, I must say - you're the most sexual person I've ever been with!"

Last words near-blur. She saw my delight, said playful, "Dearest, being in bed with you is like being with a wild animal!"

I hugged, hid blush. Our faces remained tantalizing-close after we lay back, close on same pillow.

"You're the inspiration, love" I said. "It didn't come from nowhere."

"Oh, I think this comes from everywhere," she said, smiling, lifting arms, stretching, 'til wrists struck wall. "One reason I'm not worried. There's so much. I don't eat myself with worry like with Taylor."

"Demands and detaching," I said, "kill love. I've no desire to."

Her eyes turned utterly clear. She smiled from pillow with trust so complete my heart hurt. We got closer - I nuzzled her softly - she spoke, dropping head slightly.

"I never feel I have to fit myself into some mold with you. So that makes me want to - stay around."

She lifted her eyes. Eyes met again. We kissed very gently. We lay hand in hand.

I felt we could talk of anything.

I was curious of her sexual past. "Which of your lovers did you come together with?"

"Only one. It was Nick."

"Why with him?"

"Mysteries of sexual synergy. I don't know, really."

"What about other people? Were they interested in different things?"

"Well, let's see. I've been tied up a few times. Blindfolds've been used. There were flavored lubricants - they made for some really wonderful sexual fun for all involved."

I was riveted - she'd given no hint - spoke lightly, breezing - but the bondage certainly touched dark-side.

My mind went to darker acts - I asked if she'd ever had anal sex - she said no, never'd done - black burn spread across part of my mind - I wanted to be first she experienced it with.

I turned to her, touched fingers to her face in different spots as she spoke, thoughtful. "Sex - complicates, but it can make things wonderful, too. Which we both know, I think." She yawned. I caught it again. We stretched, lay awhile, talking aimlessly, tracing patterns in one another's palms.

She looked past me, at the clock, sunset-light lighting up her face, asked if I was hungry.

"I'm there." "Let's make a proper dinner tonight." "Only if I get to help." "Alright!"

We rose up, put on shoes, walked across wooden floors into kitchen. She announced menu - lean steak, salad, vegetables - began preparing. I was assigned vegetable-cutting.

Phone rang as we were starting prep. Mira picked up, mouthed after few moments, "My mother."

She told what we'd done since my arrival - steered clear of any erotic - noticed her speaking rapidly, making almost wall of detail to distract - she focused on our music-shared - repeated my calling the Rachmaninoff *No. 3* the most difficult concerto - told story of my Academy debut - each detail precisely.

She looked over - with eyes made sure I wanted to. I smiled and nodded. She handed phone to me, large-eyed.

I put phone to lips - wondering what to say that'd recognize her mother's place yet didn't cringe - humor, yes! - she was teacher of sociology, she'd read in ancient myths - moment came to speak - flash of D.H. Lawrence's formidable mother-in-law, his nickname - my voice, impudently familiar, "Hello, *Magna Mater*!"

She halted for moment then laughed loudly, surprised - ice broken - she'd her daughter's unusual directness - "I have to tell you, Michael, I have been one nervous mother." - feeling came I could say what'd to be said - "If I were in your position, I don't think I'd be as well with it as you are. 35 year old man, 18 year old girl, from the Internet - I'd be suspicious. All I can say is, we're not rushing into anything." "I hope so, Michael. I truly hope so." Slight glimmer of possible trust. I thought reminder'd not hurt: "I told Mira before I came: if she needed space, or for me to go, I'd be gone." - sound of partway smile in her voice: "I don't think that will be necessary."

We talked a little longer, then Mira took handset - we exchanged congratulatory smiles - passed the test - after a minute or so more, she hung up. We hugged, exclaiming in relief, then back to work.

As Mira fired oven I watched her move adeptly around. Meal took shape quickly - sooner than I'd expected, plates ready. I brought out hers, then, just as I'd set down mine, I heard pop. I walked into kitchen, saw her pouring wine. When she was done she handed glass. We walked out to living room, were sitting down, when she said "Wait!" and dashed back to kitchen.

I sat, wondering what she'd bring out now.

She returned, brightly smiling, sat, held out her palm.

A book of matches.

I struck one, held it to closer candle. She struck a match and lit hers. We shook our matches out together.

Our hands went to wine-glasses. We raised them, touched their lips. She said, as wicks flamed, "Happy dinner, darling," and we drank.

As we began to eat, drink, I looked at Mira's face in flickering golden light, winter sun below horizon, complex colors of dusk flowing forward.

There came the sense of another moment.

I felt complete happiness.

We talked, tender, inexhaustible, all through dinner.

Spoke of art, our lives, of what we'd do next day - Museum of Fine Arts - early days of our relationship - I spoke of November and December past - she again of hoping the friend'd be her.

We spoke not of future. It was with us, glimmering-wordless, in our eyes.

She recalled sensing me from my journal. Her face glowed with light and shadows. The light-strings over her glistened steadily. I looked into her eyes and again my heart was pierced.

I felt finally, completely met by another person. Her consciousness was turned over to this with mine. It was hard to breathe.

"This is it," my heart sang. "It has come."

"What are you thinking?" Mira asked, smiling curiously.

"That I just love you."

"It's so peaceful and right, dearest," she said.

We leaned to one another and kissed. I closed my eyes and tasted wine from her lips flowing into my mouth.

I wished to keep this moment - her face turned to mine, her lips and mine touching - alive for all the days there remained to me.

I never wanted to be without her.

13 February 2001.

The moon'd risen - couldn't see it from Mira's window, only first-spill patches on ground, blue-bright wedges on snowed trees.

We'd turned down sheets, stood now at bed-side.

Our eyes met. "You okay with underwear and t-shirts again?" she asked.

"Of course."

We took off shoes, pants, lay down, new-ginger with each other. Arms curled. Touch brought harmony no worry could enter. We sighed, talked for some minutes - she was falling off.

When her breathing'd gone regular, I turned.

Again moon'd come - once again I'd watch, think, drift.

Shadows moved - finally cold bright disk itself - I lived again the things of the day.

I thought of how our love-making'd felt in the beginning - the promise promised there.

The moon'd moved a long way, sun was close to rising, when I saw and thought no more, and slept.

❧

I woke few hours later, sat up.

I shook my head - no effect - sleep-deprived - truly no reserves - our energy wouldn't do it - I'd to go on will.

Later in morning - outside Four - watched her focused eyes, head perfectly level as she spun through exercises - despite weariness, happy hadn't kept her awake.

Class ended. I stood up. I was becoming familiar - several smiled in passing. Mira said she'd to go to Three to rehearse dancers for her choreography.

I smiled as we walked over footway. In one, student - in another, mistress.

I stayed out of doorway, peered through side-window as she directed parts of her piece. As minutes went I tried through mental blear to imagine totality. I looked at piano.

Clear-faced woman came up, stood with me. We smiled, introduced - she worked at School.

The dancers broke ranks as I was starting to say I'd known nothing of ballet. "I'm teaching him," Mira said gaily as she came out.

The woman laughed, asked how I was doing. "Alright," said Mira. "He could always do more, though!"

"I didn't know I was going back to school," I said, slightly at loss for small talk, "but here I am."

Her eyes were kind, smile steady, unusually deep. "Keep it up. You'll find a lot inside it." She paused. "Do you live here in Boston?"

Mira and I looked at one another involuntarily. "Just visiting, for now. Never spent any time here before."

"What do you think of it?"

"I love it. I'd like to learn more of it."

"You will," Mira said, "you're coming back for my choreography!"

"I am, and I can't wait."

"Well," said the woman, "I hope to see you then."

I thanked her, said I did too.

I warmed Jeep, mused again at relation of ballet to Mira's consciousness - wondered if I understood the art at all. "Okay," I said, "so I know next to nothing about ballet. Test me on what I've been able to figure from observing so far."

She leaned forward, strongly engaged, smiled. "Okay, go!"

"There seem to me two kinds of ballet. Classical seems to be about the sky and stars, more about spiritual ascension. Modern seems more of the earth, and I'd think came in around the time music shifted to Modernism. It seems to be about bringing the natural body and the horizontal plane of the earth into dance."

Mira said I'd gotten it right. As we drove she spoke with detailed clarity about transition from Classical to Modern, related the schools to coasts of United States - dancers from East were more about pure technique and tended toward Classic, while Modern was more popular in West and put

more weight on form of a dancer's body.

She seemed deeply pleased. I hoped she'd take equal interest in the inner history of Romantic pianism.

We drifted into silence over vibrating steel bridge-plate. She looked out at water, cross-members passing by in little air-snaps, at approaching shore.

We walked to her building. I looked at gentle afternoon sun on sidewalk, our shoes crushing planes of ice over little melt-pools. I thought of salt sea, then season of which this seemed presage.

We walked upstairs, still quiet. She went into her room to change. I was standing in the living room when she came out. She didn't meet my eyes.

"What's wrong?" I said.

She turned to me, looked, walked closer, paused for a moment.

"I was thinking," she said, "on the drive home about us."

Everything I had left went alert, attended to every word.

"Okay," I said.

"Michael, we both know how complete, and deep, and right this is. It's not something I want to - have an end."

Weariness vanished.

"If," she said, "I am to be with you forever -"

Lightning crashed through me. She'd never spoken of forever. I couldn't imagine what it'd entail, could only listen - understand deeply as possible - respond as perfectly as I could.

She was still speaking, seemed to be choosing words with greatest care.

"- then I don't want to ever have a single regret. I don't want, when I'm thirty, to look back and wonder what I could've experienced and wonder or have any sort of wistful imaginings about what I could have had when I was here, and eighteen, and exploring."

I exhaled. This was a ball of energy whose elements I couldn't separate, but I knew where she was going.

"Go on," I said. "I'm with you."

"I've never had -" she paused, inhaled, "a casual, fun relationship. It was always dating, right away, heavy and commitment and - not light. I've

never had that ... and if it's okay ... if it won't hurt us ... I'd like to have that while I'm here and you're in California."

She exhaled. Amid swirls of emotion I felt sympathy: this hadn't been easy for her to say.

As I began to speak, I knew I held a future, one I'd not known, in my hands.

"Darling ... so long as it doesn't hurt us - of course. I'm going back to California, Gabrielle is there - how could I say no? But -" I saw her looking at me attentively - my mind ran at high speed to think of every possible way relationships went wrong, everything I'd learned of love - "I've tried never to ask you for anything, but I have to, now, to keep us strong. You have to agree to be open with me. Keep me in the loop. Tell me things as they're happening - in present tense. That way we don't drift apart - we'll be closer." I took her hand in mine and said, with emphasis, "Make me part of it."

She squeezed my hand tightly, said, "Of course. Nothing less would do. Oh, Michael - thank you." She moved closer to me, embraced me, said softly in my ear, "Thank you for not crushing all we have."

I held her tight and closed my eyes. As I prayed I'd made the right choice, I said, "I only want us to grow, love. Only to grow."

She tightened her arms, spoke intently. "That's why I love you. We may not be lovers right now -" a brief stab went through me - I'd not thought, before consenting, of our having put a cap on sex - "but there's so much."

I put the stab away in a corner. I'd deal later. Right now I wanted to ground what was far more important: the soaring prospect of our being together forever.

"Just stay in contact," I said. "Agree to tell me, anything material at all, that affects our relationship, and do it - and we'll stay good."

"I agree, Michael. I promise."

I pulled away, then held her to my chest, marveling at the turns life could take, at the energy flooding me.

"Then we're wonderful," I said, "and it'll be an adventure."

I smiled at her, watching reflected sunrays on her face.

We rode along under trees, joking we'd find the rental company up and gone. Mira turned on radio, moved hand in time.

I tried thinking of what we'd talked about, but my mind wouldn't go. I'd just have to enjoy the present.

At office, as I handed over keys, my stomach moved. It'd served us well. I'd never drive it again, those who'd have it'd never know of us, yet for a brief time - it had been ours.

The taxi driver turned a few times, said flatly "Avenue of the Arts," turned up a curving drive, stopped.

Mira and I walked up into massive front, then inside. We paid, took pink-and-white lapel-pins, and stepped into the wide places of art.

We went into an exhibit on long-ago photographer - entered instantly a softer world of laurel leaves, Pans, gods, and beautiful boys, costumed and photographed century before. I wondered at almost complete absence of women in the photographic world of F. Holland Day. Mira walked sharply from picture to picture - she was completely rapt, absorbed - remarkable intensity - all that existed was her and the art-work. I wondered what she was finding.

We reached exhibit's end, went out, walked the great halls - were mostly silent - strode up to this piece or that, exchanged looks, silent before fullness of art, or sudden words coming.

Down long corridor, we turned to smaller room. She wheeled on me, said, smiling, almost elated, "Now, a test!"

I acceded.

"We're going to go through the galleries" - she waved her hand toward the next room - "and you guess which painting, in each, I like the best!"

I froze for moment, then stepped into void - knowing only way through was clearing mind, no thought, listening to body's reaction. Gabrielle'd taught me that.

We walked through room, Mira's eyes on me. I felt response, and pointed.

"Yes!" she said.

In next, unthought certainty, pointed. "Yes!" she said, clapping hands once. She smiled as we entered next. In subsequent, I chose two. She smiled at one.

When we exited final room, I'd pointed to her favorite in each. We walked, arm in arm, into large hall, then tumbled round the galleries for hours.

Closing time - heavy doors into fresh wind, skipped down path in afternoon sun, laughing - galloped, horse-racing. I dug in, tried win, but she kept up - ended in tie, feet landing hard as we slowed.

We turned left, toward Huntington. I put my hands in coat, remembering, from nowhere, the flute-girl. Wind blew as we crossed to median. I spoke over it.

"Does the difference in our ages ever trouble you? Does it show? I don't want to seem an unenergetic codger with you having all these springy twenty-year-olds around."

We reached the stop. Trolley, down-road, single white eye, coming.

"You," she said, smiling, tender, "have more energy than the twenty-year-olds. The only way age shows" - she reached out, touched my cheek then upward - "is my love has some silver at his temples."

She laid her hand on my cheek, our eyes met, and wind and trolley went away.

I thought what a fool that Athenian had been.

Trolley's side-door opened.

We boarded, stood through plowed streets, automobiles shifting around. We mostly kept up save when we slowed for station - they arched ahead.

On this ride I reached last, very end, of energy. I went into a white mist of tiredness.

When we got off, as sun went toward horizon, I could hardly tell difference between inner and outer - just walked, stumbling now and then, no thoughts.

At mailbox she pulled few, stuffed in upper pocket - "Letter from

home!" - went upstairs, a bit more slowly.

We were settling on couch, I asking about ballet, when roommate's door banged. He'd been as if non-existent, now moved about kitchen noisily. She called his name.

He replied with terse "Hey." She looked at me, got up rapidly, stood in hallway. "What's up?" she said, challenge in voice. He leaned against kitchen doorway-frame, arms crossed, looking down at floor.

"What?" she said, voice rising.

"I fucking come home and the door's unlocked. There's thousands of dollars of computer equipment here and you've got people staying over ..." He shook his head again, looked at the floor.

She replied, unhesitating. "Well, you're coming off as really surly, and it's not necessary. If you're pissed about something, let's discuss it."

"Whatever. The door needs to stay locked. And this isn't a hostel."

She shrugged. "We'll have to talk about this later when you've calmed down."

I spoke from couch. "The door was my fault, not hers. I was last to leave."

He shrugged, withdrew to his room - multiple flat-color screens, no light of bulb or window, pizza box on floor by entrance - slammed door. It wedged on cable.

Mira sighed, turned to me, said quietly, "Let's go to my room. He'll cool off faster if he doesn't see us." I got up, walked, looked at her nape, admiring her composure.

We went in. She needed to ice ankle, sprang to kitchen, returned, sat bed, pressed paper-wrapped ice, grimacing. I sat on floor, against bed, absently massaged her other ankle - talked of ballet and its demands, pain relievers - questioned dose closely, asked if she'd ever be able to do without - looked at family photo by window - she about fourteen - grinning, delightful-gangly, prominent braces - her mother, stepfather, brother - I smiled, drowsy - wished I'd known her.

Mira reached down, ruffled my hair. She was done icing, wanted to update Andrea. I went to living room, for her privacy. I rounded corner, musing on time's passing.

Sunlight passed windows, fell on table.

My mind flew back to night before.

Tears came. I began to sob, covering mouth with my hand so she'd not hear.

She heard. She came out, hugged me. I leaned my head against hers, despairing.

"What is it, dearest? What's wrong?" Her words broke into me.

"It's just those candles - we had dinner last night and - we were lovers. I said to myself 'we've made it, we've made it' - and today -" I let my right hand drop, limp. I lowered my left hand, pulled my face back, so she could see, nothing hidden.

She looked up with soft love. I brought my hands up, took her face in them gently. I spoke urgently.

"Mira - we're still lovers. We may not make love right now, but we still are. We can't lose this."

I looked steadily, trying to reach. Her eyes grew wet, she began to cry too, clutched me hard, just nodded. "We're still lovers, Michael, we are, I'm sorry, it's just that sex is so messed up for me right now, I need to explore and be easy about it and then we'll be totally good."

I looked at her - and knew our love was in no way dead.

"I'll help you," I said.

We stood, talked for a time - almost forgot we stood - how her explores could help. She needed to loosen, she said, be held more loosely, not taken from her path - I suddenly caught sight-line along threads that'd gathered as I'd listened over the weeks.

I took a breath, said I needed to ask her to agree to something else. "If you feel yourself detaching, for any reason, you'll tell me, and we'll work it through."

She looked in my eyes, smiled, almost humorous, reached, put her fingers in my hair, tenderly. "Of course. Michael, I told you. We're still lovers." She looked more intense, chin dropping slightly. "I'm still the same person you made love to. I've not become someone else. We're just shifting form for a little while, then we'll come back. Expansion - that's us. Okay?"

Tension left me. She hadn't withdrawn.

We talked of next day, how fun Museum'd been - said we'd go again

next morning - costume place she wanted to visit - much walking so we'd catch a lot of Boston.

We carefully didn't mention evening, or airport.

I lay stretched out on couch, Mira sprawled against me.

It was later. The sun had set - dark blue-white world of roofs and trees and streets'd returned - inside, the same gold-white island of old walls and art prints.

I'd asked if any ballerinas were regarded like Horowitz - strange transcendental technicians.

"Not really," she said, fingers to chin, pausing. "No, there is one." She named her - French, sounded - sprang forward - rummaged old tapes, popped out *Women in Love*, slid in new, advanced through montage of performances - fast-forward lines - hit "play," backed up quickly, crab-legs, to couch, poured herself back against me, exact position she'd left.

Modern music came - strings slow, sharp-dissonant, mobile yet static - onscreen, ballerina moved stranger, more dissonant than music - slowly, no leaps, held by male partner, *en pointe* one foot, carriage perfect, upright - other leg upright, perfectly vertical - looked impossible, yet she did it, no visible effort, face clear.

She began rotating, slow, full-circle, spine and leg in parallel, music shrilling on - relentless tension - seemed an art made of tension - body pushed to where bodies did not go - couldn't go on, not a moment more, she'd break or I would - yet continued, music driving on, unbearable to look at, impossible to look away.

It ended before long - I was shaken - weird power - inhuman, like granite - it was, and was about, the Other - I wanted more, asked her for it - she'd none in Boston, have to watch over summer - she smiled, cuddled to my shoulder, said she couldn't wait, we'd make summers perfect.

She looked up at me. "You're leaving tomorrow," she said softly. My stomach turned over.

"We have almost a whole day," I said. "Then back for choreography."

She smiled, to herself, then her face cleared, serene. "I have some of

Colorado, before you come out. Hold on." She got up, walked to her room. She seemed to be walking in state of grace.

She returned, stopped above me - small notebook, opened - handed it down, open at particular page.

It was the novella - her dream. She left me to read - had things to do - email, paper-journal, such - walked off, still in strange grace. I began.

She'd called it first draft, but in few paragraphs I was taken hard, in manner few pieces ever had.

No structure, no magic-colored events - not a word out-of-place or ill-chosen, not one excess line. This came from a realm where everything had to come out right.

It went on, page after page, sustained unfailingly - attention, tension, clarity never flagged. In time I felt I was seeing not words but silver-white light.

I'd felt her from words, and here it was again, unchanged, in writing from fifteen. It was herself.

I sat by window until could read no more, closed notebook. Wasn't emotional in tone, almost unmoved - was as if she'd reached the things that gave rise to emotion.

I called her. She walked in, settled, eyes on my face. I said was fantastic, shouldn't stay buried in notebook. She said shyly it needed much work.

I looked straight in her eyes, serious. "This is good writing. With time and craft it could be great."

She sighed, laid head on my shoulder - took my hand - we talked gently for a time of the past and future. We floated above night-fallen earth until it was time for bed.

Hand in hand, we walked in. We turned down bed, then stripped to underwear and t's, lay down, slid together, no interrupt or hesitate, two bodies making a single better one. Our lips met. We kissed long, with special soft depth.

Love-making had misfired, but our bodies'd come to understand the tenderest things. As we kissed I knew this was the only foundation I wanted. Tenderness.

Our lips separated. We brushed cheeks and foreheads, drifted little apart, hugged tight, said goodnight, we loved one another.

As she began to fall asleep, her body to jump slightly - involuntary versus daylight control - I realized it didn't disturb any more. It was reassuring, was her.

For all the difficulties, nights'd been some of my favorite times. In her rapid fallings-asleep I felt trusted on an organic level - made me think of her core.

I looked back. I'd slept so little - never more than four hours, sometimes but two - wondered how I was refreshed again and again.

As I thought of the fall and return of energy, I slowly coasted down one of the troughs I was seeing.

I smiled to myself and thought, "I'm falling asleep."

Then it was so.

14 February 2001.

I awoke.

Her eyelashes almost on my nose - soft-closed, little breath-motions, silver pearlish light from ceiling and side-wall.

I stayed, looking at her. Alarm's sound hadn't found her yet. I rolled over - light-shapes on ceiling, mused how light changes by season - saw branches outside. I tapped off the alarm.

I turned back, gently hugged her. Her legs moved bit. She woke, sleepily laid head on my arm.

We snuggled, close.

In few minutes we rose, buoyantly energized, for shower - saw by body language she wanted me there - chatted of the day: things at School - but first Museum, then costume place, in evening go toward airport. We spoke glancingly, my stomach fluttered, but I knew nothing'd keep us down.

Went toward bathroom - his door was wedged - wondered if he was gone - awake? asleep? what'd he do, exactly?

We dropped towels - soon, steam in window-light. We didn't talk much. We washed ourselves, each other, passed shampoo and other things, looked eye into eye. I wanted to hold this 'til next visit. We hugged, separated, ran hands over each other to remove soap, rinsed, got out, began toweling.

I went into living room, flipped dirties behind chair, into her room to change. I walked to bathroom to shave - found Mira sipping water from glass. She finished, rising-on-toes, turned to me, held out bottle, smiling - label bore name of pharmacy in Colorado and her dosage.

I wondered about her as depressed person. I'd never met anyone who seemed less so. It seemed airy-abstract, insubstantial. What'd they do for her? What happened if not taken?

We were ready. Spoke of transit route, times - decided to return after Museum - could pick up duffels, even have bit of leisure.

At door, Mira offered a ceremonial key-turn - on way down, ribs were elbowed, hips were knocked - in courtyard, kicked snow at each other - as I aimed for her cloak, noticed snow was heavier, wetter.

We passed over ice, snow, water in spots - sun streaming through air

and trees. When we reached platform, I realized I'd slept for more than a few hours.

I tossed my head back a little and laughed.

I stepped onto Huntington, then Mira. The trolley huffed doors shut, went humming off into cool daylight. Past the wires, I saw tree tops blowing in dry breeze - heard it - saw, behind them, blue sky, clouds floating in over city.

We joined arms, walked up drive into the warm, quiet halls of beauty. As we passed temporary space set up for F. Holland Day, I smiled. I'd've liked second look, but I knew she - as at Chau Chow - would aim at the new.

We walked fast clip, slowed as she pointed favorites along way. After while, began following walls from room to room, random.

We walked into small gallery - long and thin.

She went ahead. It was empty of others.

In gallery ahead, people walked out.

Near-silence.

A tick.

I looked at some paintings on the wall.

Another tick - dry - echo.

I looked around - white walls, wood floors, white ceiling.

Five seconds later, another.

I found it.

Down on floor, near my left shoe.

Brown-metal-and-glass case, long and thin like a shoe-box.

One end, paper drum behind glass, spring-loaded pen on it.

Other, small grille for air to pass in.

As I looked, paper moved with tick - tiny mark appeared. Dim, two thermometer bulbs through grille.

It was a recording humidograph.

Tiny chain led from screw-post in wall to machine.

I looked up, saw Mira standing, left of door ahead. She was before a

portrait of woman, done in flat realist style.

I walked forward.

Drew closer - saw woman had shadow-self: translucent silver-greys, offset slightly to left of her - seemed of smoke, refracted air, cobweb - duplicate of, slightly different to original: eyes possibly narrower, stance perhaps different.

I looked down at little wall-plate.

It was by Magritte.

A tick.

Mira said slowly, "This is extraordinary."

"Yes," I said. "Strange power."

"I have to come back, and really spend some time with this."

"We should."

Her hand went in mine, we walked past the woman and her ghost, into the gallery beyond.

We followed its walls, then through galleries after, as if on a single ribbon of art. Before us passed works of all times, tempers.

Painting succeeded in time to long soft-lit room of harpsichords and fortepianos. We smiled at each other.

Before long, a stairway.

Our feet fell upon the floor, the echoes sounded, and we walked forth into the floor of Asian art.

Non-Western world of dark colors - materials of earth, wood, metal - flow, even when angled - each object distinct in its glass. No wall-following here. We looked about, knocked off-center.

We entered a dark-lit room. Japanese religious figures, man-sized, hewn of stone and wood. Electric spot-beams, harsh, splashed to walls behind.

I stood before Fudo Myo'o, Immovable One - fierce face, flames rising behind. Mira to my right, other side of entrance. I turned to see her. She bent to look at another statue, beams fell on her head - blazed light-golden - light outlined strong-muscled curves of her body. I felt as if

Fudo Myo'o flames roared in me and struck instant raging desire. We were alone, no steps approached. Image of pulling her into alcove, push her to wall, my body to hers, pressed hard. Her hands on my face, kisses hungry and dark, my hands under her clothes. Turning her, taking her against wall, insistent, her head pulled back in pleasure as I took her, to the utmost of us both ...

I walked to her, blood hot. I walked with her as she looked at the rest of statues. I stood behind her, glowering, looking down where her hair thinned, clear skin of her neck. I remembered how close we'd come to mutual-joy. I strained to it now, to union in the full.

We circled the Japanese Temple Room, talked of Buddhist history, and I smoldered.

We came out to a large open room. In its middle was extraordinary long display case. We drew up to it, split off, Mira to right. A very long scroll was in it, unrolled. I circled from left, looked at faded strokes of a delicate hand that'd been dust for hundreds of years. I came to her side. She was reading the descriptive plaque. I looked at drawn-illustrations, then stopped, standing over. I could hear her breathing, almost smell her skin and hair.

She looked up, smiled, said, hand moving toward glass, "Michael - this whole great thing is an erotic story."

Skin of my face and hands burned. She was turning to go. I reached for her right shoulder, laid my other hand on her other shoulder. I pulled her straight back to me. Not abrupt - smooth, strong. She froze slightly but didn't resist. I pulled her body harder against mine, backs of her thighs pressed to fronts of mine, the hard outpressed muscles atop her thighs now pressed tight to my unriven groin, and I knew she felt the rigid hardness risen.

I held her shoulders firm, leaned forward to her right ear, said, voice low in tone, surprising me in near-coarseness, "Back in the Temple Room I was thinking of *taking* you right there."

Her breath shuddered in, deep. I didn't want her feeling it any less than it was, didn't want her to escape in any way. I brought lips nearer, said, voice rougher, "What are you feeling?"

She arched, pressing her haunches to mine, molding the hardness between the muscled cleft, and there came answer.

"Desire!" gasped Mira Graham, arched against me. I took pride in room's resonant echo. People were near. If they heard or saw, so much the better.

I immediately released, pushing her away, ever so slightly, with fingertips. She walked ahead an unsteady step, then looked at me over-shoulder, head down to one side, eyes large, touched with fear and connection.

I stood there, half-smiling, wolfblood in veins. She was held for a moment, then I ceased. I was content, in room of treasures from beyond sea, to go civilized again.

Silently, we went out. My back was upright as, side-by-side, we walked to new visions.

After many rooms, the gift-shop. She bought Fredric Leighton print - *Painter's Honeymoon* - for Catherine.

And then it was time to go.

We walked toward Huntington. As we passed the trees, my stomach tightened. We waited on median, then trolley came. Rode atop road-asphalt, then private right-of-way between buildings - dropped into subway, whistling.

It went black through windows, we laid our heads close, and I touched my forehead to hers again. We closed our eyes, and just rode.

I sat down on the couch as she popped in *Chasing Amy*.

Heading upstairs she'd teased that while we'd watched my favorite, and we had two hours free ...

She cuddled up. Credits rolled, and I sat straight. Few things mean more than people's favorites, and I wanted to give all.

It wasn't what I'd expected - that charmed me. It'd the sensate gritty insouciance of generation after mine. Yet, underneath, airy sense, almost spiritual, of feeling-explorations, of souls a little more open than before. New things could happen.

There were signs-of-youth: hardness to the self-definings - tension round the head like a tight band - definitions seemed in eyes and, above all, words - sharp offense at any attitude that might impugn the defined.

As Joey read Ben the riot act, I smiled.

Yet so sincere, in the end - old structures on which one could stand to posture were gone. So, all together, we must break a new way.

I told her my liking.

We hugged, she expressed gladness. I quipped when she liked mine as much we'd balance. She called it mainly a big provocative jumble, needed time to get pieces arranged - then noted we'd stayed too long.

I looked at clock, saw she was right. I grabbed duffel, went to her room. Pulling off shirt, saw bookcase - the two paperbacks leaned against each other - couldn't let it pass - found small near-square of paper, a pen by her laptop.

There was no time to think.

To Mira -
For whenever you find this -
I love you.
Michael

I eyed each - dusty atop, unread recently.

I tucked it between them.

In traveling clothes, I opened her door.

She was standing right there.

I looked round her room, then to living room. We picked up duffels, down hallway with one each.

I went out the apartment door, looking back along floor to living room for the Christmas lights.

Then the frame cut my sight-line, and the door clicked shut.

We were walking on sidewalk, plate-glass verticals of office buildings on each side of street.

Wind kept snow from settling.
It hit me: I was going away - wouldn't see her for weeks upon weeks.
My stomach twisted, then my mind cleared.
Came sense of flux. Things wavered in me.
I reached a decision.
I told Mira I was going to quit my job.

A sidewalk in hard bright sun - stiffest wind since beach. Talking of strange systems of thought, how their very strangeness sometimes brought penetrating insights. Thought of Rand, mentioned Jocelyn's long-ago essay on the purity of adolescent values. Mira asked if that was why I was willing to be involved with someone so young as her.

"I'm willing to be *in love* with someone young as you because most people kill themselves as they mature. I've more in common with you, and some of your peers, because you're of undestroyed soul. When your mother or anyone else asks, tell them that, straight from me."

She smiled, thought, said "Good answer."

Platform over floorful of tight-spaced clothes racks. Tangent gust blew, and I swatted the swinging door shut with my shoe.

The air was musty, damp - maybe steam radiators near old brick. She walked downstairs, lightly, assured. I didn't want to. The whole place repulsed me, I knew not why.

She began holding costumes up, displaying. I went down, resistant, unsure of my problem. I touched fabrics, saw beautiful colors, felt her delight, and whatever-it-was faded.

When we were done we went upstairs, to street. She pointed uphill. We turned left, began to climb, cloud-drifted sun on our left. I couldn't quite see where road went - but were sun-patches ahead.

A sidewalk that led to the School.

Strode past trees, over curbs, down into streets, up curbs onto next block-starts.

The all-day winds'd slowed. Cloud masses come from west, brought early, occluded dusk. I lifted my eyes. Zenith still clear, dark blue, few small white stars through branches.

I saw ahead, coming toward, a man stepping into cross-street. He was walking two light-colored Russian Wolfhounds. Mira smiled, advanced, murmured names as they came to her, nuzzled in her hand. We all stopped.

He smiled at her, eyes never leaving. "I've not seen you in quite a while." Mira straightened up, said, "Four weeks." He looked at me, sheepish. "We used to run into each other," he said. "Every ... Thursday, I think."

"Yes," said Mira. "You have beautiful dogs," I said. He smiled, bashful. The dogs were pushing noses at her slightly-curled hand, eyes looking up, wanting her notice.

"Well, thank you!" he said.

Mira opened her hand. Both dogs leaned in. She petted, bent, spoke softly. She stood straight, closed hand. "I'll see you again sometime," he said, looking between us, perfectly boyish, abashed.

Mira smiled, looking beyond him.

I nodded, briefly.

We walked in our respective directions.

I thought of how men looked upon her.

The atrium-lobby. Dancers walked around me, some in street clothes, some in tights.

I thought of her choreography debut, wondered if it'd take place in Three, Four - or Grand Studio, at building's top floor.

I walked to stairs, looked up - over, along footway. I stood among the dancers and recalled it all.

Before long, Mira coming, ready to go. We hugged, pulled part-back, looked up, heads turned, standing close.

"There we met," I said.

"Such a glorious day, dearest." We looked down, at each other.

"This place'll always be special."

"When I come here, I'll see where you were. Where you stood, where you played for me."

"Where we first touched."

"In one of my favorite places."

"Better than the airport - even with some terror."

"Oh God, Michael. It was surreally frightening. I was hardly awake, and there was your cheery voice saying the plane had almost crashed and you'd be just a bit late."

I looked up, then in her eyes. We hugged once more, turned as one to Security-desk. I put my hands on the ledge. "Well, Ed, goodbye for now."

"Alright Mr Brown. Good to see you again."

"I'll be back in April."

"See you then." He gave me the clipboard.

I signed, went to side, got duffels, walked back to Mira.

"Shall we go?" I said.

"Yes. Let's."

The air outside was still. A fine mist of rain. We looked at each other. "Let's walk for a while," she said.

I smiled, and said "Yes."

So, we set off into Boston, wandering again, not even the goal of the first night, only to walk by one another for a time, and see what we might find.

❧

Few seconds in, I held out a duffel, straight-faced. She head-tossed slightly, nostril rising, and after letting dangle few seconds longer than necessary swept away.

We resisted, then smiled. "Weaker sex," I said. I almost slipped on slickness, dodging the ankle-kick. Mira laughed as my duffel swung behind knee, twisting me at trunk. I straightened, spun on soles to keep bag

swinging for her knee. She hopped fleetly, fluttering momentarily on cobbles, almost tripped.

We recovered. I offered my arm, she offered hers. Peace reigned. Our steps went quieter. Curving street succeeded to straight.

We looked up at passing buildings and trees. The time of my leaving was coming, but as we walked we were less and less in time, entered aura of first moments of touch. Amid trees and rain and dark air, timelessness again. I wasn't leaving, I'd never leave, we would walk through the night-rain forever, delicately outstretched to what was to come.

We came upon cars, passing in misty flares. We turned to stronger lights, down-road. Before long, cream-colored laced-stone building, upper floors dark, strong light pouring from first two.

She exclaimed company's name - famous toy store, for adults and young, caterer to the well-off.

We crossed stone plaza - dark-colored sculpture, darker by rain - teddy bear wearing ribbon about its neck. At its side spilled large alphabet-blocks - FAO - its right arm was held stiffly up, a featureless paddle. As we passed, I saw the face was without expression.

Light-slant from entrance slid up Mira's face and hair, lit her against night. Enthused, she reached to open doors.

We entered plush world - sudden tall wooden soldiers, human-sized apple-cheeked Raggedy Ann on blonde-wood rocker, toy pedal-cars in T-Bird and Ferrari models, Lionel train-set track close to perilous foot-traffic. Duffels in care of helpful employee, we set out. We walked quickly, all over, without weight.

Mira'd gone off somewhere and I'd wandered to area with few shoppers. I came on display alcove dressers had empty, some reason. I looked closely - saw, atop plank, small pile of red glitter.

I turned - there was Mira walking up - our eyes met - permanent presence between us.

I pressed finger to glitter, held up - she did same, we began to daub each other's faces - cheek, forehead, outside of ear. I rubbed fingers, flicked some in her hair.

"Hey!" she said. She snapped some in mine, wiped smudge on my nose, then leaned up, glitter-cheeked, for quick kiss.

We went down, got duffels. As we went out, I looked over before light faded. Her face sparkled. We went past statue, away from light.

The mist'd gone thinner, cars and street lights more distinct. Above it all hung cloudy sky.

We walked beside cars. Said I was hungry, wanted to sit with her. Good places nearby, she said. We turned a few times.

Along line of old gathered storefronts, Brooklyn-like, walked in dissipating mist, spoke of physical energy and where it came from - ahead, right, small walk-down sushi restaurant.

"Have you ever had sushi?" "No, never have. Do you like it?" "One of my favorites. Want to try?" She hesitated, then said "Sure!"

We walked down - letters on window above - antiques, fine jewelry - imagined us after dinner, her trying on jewelry - vague image of her slipping on an armlet.

Inside - underwater colors, white-and-blue - small deep-blue counter to back, parallel to in-running wall - six chairs facing bar, one on short-side. Sushi-crew hailed us.

Clean white napkins laid, paper-wrapped chopsticks across, small light-colored soy-sauce bowls. We walked down, almost to far wall - I sat one seat in, Mira two, bar-center. I took off coat, she cloak, droplets on white-and-blue tiles. I picked up menu, began to tell of sushi.

She professed herself unready for visible raw fish. I told her to stick to rolls for now - I'd eat what she didn't. She asked for beginner's course - I ordered tekka, chicken-egg sushi, cucumber to show vegetable taste. I ordered same for myself, and tuna and salmon nigiri.

Cupped-palm bowls of hot miso soup - I told of taste-adjustments of soy sauce - stirred up tofu, lifted to my lips, sipped - ethereal and hearty.

Soon sushi on small wooden boards - Coke in cans on bar - showed her my wasabi-way - never dissolve in soy sauce, always tap-on-dry, to vary charge. As she tasted maki I felt pride again in bringing her food. Sushi'd always be touched with this.

I looked at fresh food, sparkling cola over ice in clear glasses, men be-

hind bar, smiling, moving quickly in small space, speaking low - we talked round mouthfuls - clear happiness.

I ordered more - she ventured nigiri bites - in time glasses ice glint - narrow clear-brown band at bottom - wooden boards bare but for small wasabi.

Sadness round my heart - close to parting.

Crew bade us farewell. Walked up, looked up, then around.

Rain had stopped, completely.

We looked at antiques-window. Heavy colors - few too many tassels - elected to pass. We turned left, walked swinging duffels in time with feet, bantering.

Before long she spoke with pleasure of sushi. I asked why cities had Ivy League streets: Dartmouth before - now Exeter. We'd crossed Fairfield, academe gone, dark blocks ahead, when she noticed light pouring from walk-up's windows. We read sign - "Mayan Weavers" - looked at each other, smiling.

Into a big space, bright-lit, full of native rugs, pottery, figures, clothes. South American woman - quiet composure, braided hair - greeted from behind counter. We began to wander.

Wall-display - wide-belly jar, painted in old Venetian colors: dark-blues and mustard-yellows and leaf-greens in plant forms against light cream back-color. I took it down, hefted, upended. A sticker - "Made in Guatemala" - above, hand-inked under glaze, "Bella Hogar" - between two, "pintado a mano."

I handed to Mira - she turned it, smiled, knee-dip - "I think the Gabrielle-girl'll like this." "I think you're right," I said. "And I think it should come from both of us." Mira bit her lip slightly, still smiling, then nodded. "I want," she said, "to find one just from me to her."

She walked. I lingered looking at quipu, then she was back, something in hands - native wood-carving, rude-painted, of an owl.

We went to her at the counter. I handed my card. She smiled, like sun breaking through leaves - she'd gravity that made everything meaningful.

We stopped at door before going out.

We repacked duffels, to fit new. Mira took some olds to stow for me.

It was time for airport.

We took up duffels again, opened door, looked out.

A cold rain was falling again.

The trolley, through the rain.

We huddled on a seat like refugees.

When young, I'd heard a flute play "Greensleeves." Something new and old in me was touched, and I'd cried.

Ever after, I'd heard it at goodbyes.

I heard it now.

And the car bore on.

At the terminal stop, we got off.

Walked along walls, night-dark windows, as signs told.

Quiet, chests and stomachs clenched.

Too soon, escalator.

Got on, turned, took one another's hands.

I looked in her eyes - wide, starting to wet.

"I'm going to miss you," I said.

She dropped her chin, looking full.

"I'm going to miss you too," she said. "So much."

Her eyelids trembled. She looked away.

"My choreography - I'm dedicating it to you, Michael. You inspired it - it's yours."

I pulled her to me. She held tight.

I began to cry. Wetted her strands. They, my cheek.

She was shaking.

We reached the top.

Beyond, she couldn't go.

Stepped around into little recess between escalator and wall.

We dropped duffels, looked straight in one another, tears flowing.

Our hands touched one another's bodies.

We stopped moving.

It was time.

Time stopped for it.

"Goodbye for now, beloved," I said.

"Come back soon, dearest," she said. "It'll be torture being away you."

We kissed, long and close and hungry.

I pressed to her back, her shoulders, her arms - to remember.

Her fingers went up my back, then in my hair.

Our kiss broke into small soft ones.

Then our lips closed and we rested cheeks against one another.

We stood back, parted.

Her lips trembled.

"Write me soon as you get home, okay?"

"I will."

"Okay. Travel safe."

She smiled through tears.

Same smile on my face, through same rain.

I picked up all of my baggage.

"Bye," she said, almost-whisper.

I walked to the doorway, and through.

I stopped, wheeled.

She was still by the alcove, in the silver-claw cape.

Our eyes met.

Something stirred in me.

I dropped duffels.

I raised myself, did a little leap upward, sank down, folding hands, bowed to her.

She rose, sank down, folding arms like petals, bowed to me.

We rose together.

Our eyes held one another.

I turned and walked forward.

V. PASSING AWAY

15 Feb.–12 Mar. 2001

"Be a light unto yourself."

- by one of the accounts, Buddha's last words

15 February 2001.

I flew, sitting back, eyes closed, remembering.

Again we met - walked in night - laid my head in her lap - kissed - rode to sea - made love - galloped out of Museum - rode escalator.

Later, memories began circling - I halted them. Sleepless I'd remain - brightly alert, nothing to illumine.

Peculiar flatness - horizons narrow, much new and unknown in future - couldn't cast self there. I stretched out, and as the air rushed by rode out the blankness of the time.

The connector plane rose hard from Las Vegas, cut over Sierras before angle down to Oakland - slight bounce on descent - small shock of alarm - reminded myself something far worse'd been much smoother, shown no sign.

Ground lit with traceries - dots, circles of street lamps - metal-orange and white-blue amid dark oblongs of parks, schools, houses.

I breathed deeply, stretched every muscle - wanted to be completely present, but so little sleep - going blank.

Plane banked, turned, lights outside tilted - then everything straightened, lights passed, we touched down.

Gates - people with bags, strollers - down long straights, past restaurant and newsstand - long down-bowed ramp, windows beside.

At bottom - Gabrielle, standing looking up, smiling, clear blue eyes. I surged, strode, dropped duffels, held her.

I felt better than ever. I released, looked down, smiling - she hesitated.

{ *no* }

Nervous stomach-twist.

She looked up - her eyes were dim.

I sank inside. "How was your flight?" in conventional voice.

"It was - fine," I said, stomach-locked.

I looked at her - shoulders slightly hiked, head turned part-away - looked at me at-angle, eyes hooded, note of fright and hostility - fist of heat began to clench, but I pried it open.

She hesitated - I waited - she said nothing - she'd locked up, felt my let-down - it made conflict worse - I began to stiffen too - didn't want to make worse, but felt good feelings being taken away - rebelled.

We turned, walked - jangled, out of kilter - as we hit open air it began to clench again - I let it - stride became harder, more exact, annoy growing with silence.

In car, I asked what the hell wrong, why were things so off - she cried out she didn't know, so much to take in - voices rose - she pulled out - her driving strangely unaffected - we began to yell - release, as if not at each other but frustration-to-frustration - before highway, relax began - held hands as she merged on.

Lights across Bay - girdered top-lane to tunnel through island - onto towered span under sky, over waters, speeding toward city's far side.

Downtown - buildings - so few from before Great Quake - my mind floated - Wilde - "It is an odd thing, but every one who disappears is said to be seen at San Francisco" - then buildings lower to ground.

Soon fluorescent tunnel - profoundly ugly light - mused on living in incandescent world.

Our fingers stayed curled - road flat - rising - I looked left - Royal Ground - then Russian district - on right, gold-leaf onion domes, dark-yellow moon, of Holy Virgin Cathedral - stars at top of hill before sea down - suddenly remembered Wilde's next sentence.

"It must be a delightful city, and possess all the attractions of the next world."

We were nearly back.

Our hallway - looked down length - it was all-new - sudden delicacy rose, as if I had my fingers directly on my own life.

I shut door - Gabrielle moved aside, recessed, peaceful. In quiet apartment, thought-feeling opened like eyes in morning - "I should not be here. This isn't for me."

I set duffel by closet, laid coat on top - all felt like dream, and in simplicity of no-sleep the life-dream'd taken new, righter turn. I turned left, into bedroom - she was sitting on bed, looking at me gently, as if waiting.

I walked by, opened communicating-door to little bathroom to splash water on my face - as I passed the threshold said, over my shoulder, "I'm moving to Boston."

Gabrielle hesitated and said, as I moved to turn on the cold San Francisco water, "Okay ..."

White hand-towel - cheeks, forehead, wiped hands - turned, sat, we began talking of her moving to Boston, too - she spoke of her love of movement, change, was unsure when she'd come East - but, in stripped light of clarity, we knew it was my time.

Something hot flowed under the light - rose up - words turned harder - electricity - we leaned forward, also reared back, like enemies - began to argue over nothing.

We stopped, looked, seized each other. We kissed, fury surging, tore clothes, still kissing.

In hours that followed, we made love more passionately than we ever had. As our bodies pounded together, I felt the presence of our other lovers - and it spurred me on.

After heat, temperate, intimate. We rose, showered, each other's eyes, startled - eruptive passion, changes sweeping lives.

We toweled. I said I'd check mail, then bed - went to office. At end of week's cascade, two Miras - first, copy of one to mother - list of loved books - no shock at, among sixteen, a few shared - Allende's *House of the Spirits*, Gendler's *Book of Qualities*.

Then, little after, to me - I was nervous - so many people pulled back, even after joy - second thoughts.

"Welcome home," subject - she missed me - bed'd feel a bit lonely, but she'd find way to manage - she loved me - was so very glad for all that'd happened, all to come - been happiest Valentine's Day in a long time - she'd me to thank - closed, "All my love, many hugs and soft kisses, Mira."

In delight I hit "reply" - I carried one-half of our days, she carried other - their joining'd been first of many in our glowing world - I sent, then copy on ICQ - one'd get there - turned off, went to Gabrielle - and we began to tell of our other lovers.

We stayed up talking after dawn, walls and our faces touched with delicate light. I slept not a minute - energy of roused life stronger even than this, profoundest tiredness I'd ever known.

When dawn'd melded into bright morning, I showered, dressed, kissed Gabrielle, drove off.

❧

I walked up. I saw grey cubicles, grey-blue carpet through window - thought, "The Slough of Despond."

Walked in - two agents looked up, then away, faces tight - irked at my taking two days extra - I'd not deigned to tell anyone - that, with barely-hidden 'net use, made them feel put-upon. I'd've worried, once.

Looked around, on way to desk - helped build it, been its face on television, represented it before auditors, judges, agents of financial giants. Now, a past life.

Went off to closed office to price loans - done, almost noon, rounding corner to my desk - passed Randy, once college athlete and bartender, now Vice-President.

"Harry wants to see you, Mike," he said, small hot Basque eyes on me, small smile at lip-corners. Harry was founder-CEO, and Randy liked trou-

ble. So troops'd talked, and he'd talk to me.

"Okay, no problem. Five minutes." Randy nodded. We walked past each other.

In Harry's office'd been many meetings, conference calls with lawyers, gruff-but-twinkle-eyed warnings to stay off 'net. Now he, behind desk, slight slouch, looked up at me with canny eyes. Randy took chair beside desk, sat lightly upright, still athletic in form and bearing.

I took other chair, looked Harry right in eye - felt new strength. I'd adapted to firm's quirks over time - now, no more. Silently, I thanked Mira and Gabrielle.

"So, how was Boston?" said Harry, amiably. He wasn't going to fire - just issue warnings.

"Life-changing," I said, crisply. Immediately felt distaste at myself. Didn't want Jocelyn in my mouth. But now I couldn't be together with these men. It was time to part.

They hesitated - expected my chatter, then bring me to heel, Randy bad cop, Harry good-but-pained, and it'd all go on as it had for almost ten years.

"People are pissed off, Mike," said Randy, serious face. "Gotta tell you, you don't have many friends left out there."

"I know," I said - raised my hand, fingers together, bowed my head slightly. "Guys - it's all kind of moot. I'm leaving."

"You're leaving?" said Harry, wonder-struck.

"The time's come," I said, easier now. "I haven't been fully happy here for some time, and it's just not good to stay in a situation like that."

"You're leaving," said Harry, almost to himself.

Randy looked appreciative - of a sudden, we were equals.

"Is there anything I can say," said Harry, cautiously, "that'd convince you to stay?"

I smiled, easy. No more Citylights. "No, boss," I said. "It's time. You'll do fine without me. It's all set up."

"Would you be willing to stay for four weeks, so we can wrap some of

our projects?" said Harry.

"What in hell's in Boston, anyway? A woman?" said Randy.

"No problem," I said, then turned to Randy. "Yes, actually - a girl." He grinned, interest lost - had it pigeon-holed, now.

"So," said Harry, "what about you and - Gabrielle? Splits?"

"Nah. Just gonna play it as it lays."

He leaned back, studying my face. "Is a move to Boston in your future?"

"Possibly. Everything's in the air right now."

"What's this girl like?" asked Randy.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Give us a hint," said Harry.

I told them.

Harry looked at Randy. "I'd move to Boston!"

Randy held back, tightened his smile, said nothing.

"And," I said, "she's good with my being with Gabrielle, too. They're friends."

"You're kidding," said Harry.

"I'm truly not."

"No wonder you're on that fucking Internet so much," he grumbled - then smiled widely.

"We'll miss you, Mike," said Randy, unexpected.

Harry put out his hand. "Good luck," he said. "In Boston or wherever." I leaned to him, shook.

Randy and I shook. "Good luck, tiger," he said, grinning irrepressibly.

I stood. "Anything else?"

"Stay off the damn Internet," said Harry.

"Absolutely, boss."

"Seriously. Tone it down. The natives are restless."

"Alright." I said. "Fair enough." I walked to door, then said, "See? That was easy."

Harry shook his head and pointed to his scalp. "See these grey hairs, Brown? You!"

I laughed, shut so they could talk.

Went to desk, plopped down, and just smiled.

I opened ICQ to tell Gwen.

Life in San Francisco began to re-establish itself that evening.

I called my mother and grandmother - they knew not of Mira or trip - mother on the strange steady cancer-plateau, as if supported from below - spoke, tone of near-wonder, how busy - I asked what doing - she said daily chores, nurse-visits, work in garden - I suddenly choked up - didn't let her know - her life was hurrying by.

Gabrielle and I, down Geary - favorite Thai place, Sky Chef - over my plate of pad thai, hers larb gai, spoke of meeting Darin - she was bit nervous - feared he'd stop liking after seeing she'd a boyfriend - probably hangover from monogamous ideas, she said, but she couldn't quite shake. I assured I'd do what needed to make meeting good.

We returned home, Gabrielle called him, set date - next night, at Royal Ground. As we sat back on couch and *Star Trek: Voyager* began, Mira, unbeknownst, wrote ICQ - wanted to say hello - loved me, missed me - if we didn't talk soon she'd scream - off to sleep - signed with kiss and "Sweet Dreams, Beloved."

I wanted to reset sleep-times - after *Voyager*, bed - cuddled, talked to hold off sleep - we spoke of her meeting Mira, soon possible - my going or not, advantages of each - their being alone'd be good - much as ever, wanted them independent of me - but wanted her to see Mira and I interact.

In end we agreed to combine: Gabrielle'd out first, then I'd join after some days.

Talk brought serenity - building something, strong, well-founded - stayed up - almost midnight - to my office - found Mira's ICQ-words - more ardent than ever, and I reveled.

I opened ICQ, replied, declared tomorrow it'd be, asked schedule, pantomimed kiss-of-fingers, closed "till tomorrow, darling" with smile-face at end.

I collapsed into bed, curled with Gabrielle, fell almost instantly into profound sleep.

16 February 2001.

Woke in few hours - untired - tiptoed to office - read journals - quiet - wondered when Mira'd write of us - thought of my own - time to tell we'd met, was open, wonder-filled.

Began with near-crash - told how days'd felt - said events'd be told later - called Darin benevolent enigma, hoped to know him soon.

Words came, for end -

> *I touch three shoulders and ask, "How are you doing?"*
> *So long as there is connection, we are well.*

- in moment's inspire, copied to them - suggested each write, send other three, do cycle - get to know each other better.

Soon as I'd posted, as if awakened for it, delicious sleep came close, and I slipped into bed.

I walked into work, direct to pricing office - inputted base prices into calculating matrix - recalled being first loan-pricer, back in wildcatter days - company'd gone mature and fun'd left.

I finished, headed to desk - at corner-office, Harry asked to lunch. I smiled to myself - have to be firm when he tried to convince.

He'd taught me much about business, had in genial way been substitute father.

But that, too, had to go now.

He took with grace - I talked of life-changes - focus off firm eased him - he asked about Mira - found Gabrielle's consent incredible - looked askance when I told of Darin.

"And you're okay with that? Why?"

"If she's okay with my being with Mira, how couldn't I be with her following her heart? Or body?"

"Brown - you're an animal."

"Some think so."

He paid bill - we drove back, peaceful. In our years, he'd cheated me - and shown much generosity. He'd treated me unfairly - and forgiven transgressions. He'd been the main personal reason I'd stayed.

Lighter afternoon work - mail - small startle - Darin - four names at top - felt communal.

He greeted - exclaimed strange he'd heard names often yet knew only what half of us looked like - at day's end some strangeness'd be removed - hoped rest'd be before long.

My letter'd spoken of cycle as stretchy unusual - as big fan of stretchy unusualness, he thought fine idea - briefly expressed feelings about airplanes, crashing and otherwise - had to be off to meeting - signed it -

the benevolent enigma

I noted the mirroring - as always, struck oddly - why only seem to interact?

Letter from Gabrielle, to all - let-loose, whirling, advancing - teased at advantage in having spoken personally to each - summoned when she'd known Mira's looks and I'd not - my plane-ride'd been too close for comfort - yet nearness of death could turn mundane into transcendent - why she'd used to find planes exhilarating - been happy if she'd died it'd've been having adventure, expanding, taking chances instead of sitting safely at home -

which is an illusion anyway, "safe at home"

- been riding intoxicating line between life and death - life was so much more full, rich now - didn't want to die - every moment felt like more just round corner - wasn't done yet - been thinking of death - singing choral piece, Whitman-text - it invoked, welcomed death as sort of dark goddess, broke into dance about life and death almost as if same - she'd been musing meaning, different ways to approach death - wasn't sure what to make, yet.

This was Gabrielle-I-loved - grappling fundamentals, finding her way by grapple itself - proud she'd be seen by other exceptionals - Whitman minded me of Mira.

In afternoon work-dips, Gwen - talked of my resigning - she, oddly fascinated, intrigued - inspired something in her - I couldn't wait to tell Mira - it was spreading - Gwen asked how meeting Darin might feel - I said'd be healthy, completing - wished I'd been bigger part of the beginning, but circumstance - was glad Gabrielle'd followed intuition.

Close to office-close time - I'd stayed off AIM - activated - Mira, instantly, before I'd even checked if she was on -

Mira: ye gods I miss you!!!!

My stomach'd turned over hard, I said - she pantomimed hug - said just typing me made her go hot all over - asked if I was sure I hadn't invaded her head - I said missed her, pantomimed strong hug - would offer no assurances of non-invasion (she hmph'd) - swore I, too, was in different world - had been since we'd first chatted.

She'd movie-invitation from work-boy named Kee - treated it casually - next day off to Colorado for nine days - would talk to Andrea, clean, pack, make us-time - Jeremiah might bring delicious food - she teased whether Andrea or I more important - I called her big and bold now I was 3000 miles away, couldn't toss her down with greatest ease - she screeched I might be big, able to toss - at least credit her with ability to fight - yes, I said, she fought, which was - pleasing - her reply, delighted capitals, accused me of utter incorrigibility - in lower-case she noted flirting'd become much worse since visit - I observed she'd not protested said incorrigibility - and interlinear flirting'd even more dangerous edge. There was a long pause -

Michael: darling, send your itinerary a.s.a.p. - i want to plan and plot trip things

- and then I realized the net'd dropped our connection.

I drove home, into evening - onto Great Highway, unexpected-

ly touched by joke about invasion - hers, the shining mind I'd once felt I couldn't enter.

Early in Royal Ground - no Darin - table inside, in sidewalk-view - sat across from each other, for his comfort - he was late - sudden hope he'd not show, never make contact - couldn't account for it - some primitive part dreaded.

I didn't suppress, didn't identify-with - just let be. In time, it eased. Still, tension grew. After few dozen minutes - we spoke of leaving - he - I knew - walked in. Joy washed through me, unaccountable as dread.

He was slender, mid-height - distinct face, long, separate somehow - hair thinning, blonde with dark notes - clear pretty skin, glittery green eyes - nicely turned out, understated - moved quietly.

I stood - he and I hugged - he and Gabrielle - felt no strange, no jealous. He sat down, said transit-delay - we began to talk - no easing-in - intelligent, gentle in presentation, well-rounded vocal tones, quick edges - seemed a good persuader.

He and I talked - childhoods with computers - computer-languages gone by - Gabrielle and I in goofy, amused mood - he more reserved, observer - all spoke of Wilde, other rebellious pioneers - several points she looked at us, exclaimed at luck, "two excellent guys" - we, courtly, gallant to her - in bubbling moment I spoke in lightest flirty way to him - he was agreeable, receptive, nothing more.

About forty minutes in, she was hungry - I suggested walk about - all joined hands, smiling - let go - walked out, paused on sidewalk - above street, night-fog coming - I suggested all-night place - Big Heart Video Cafe - once store licensed to show films - floor converted to American-style diner - day and night beamed full-length movies on synch'd screens - four, five - in eating area - still offered tapes for rent, from dark front-corner.

Up sidewalk - white in-walls, fluorescent stream into fog, lit out fog itself - walked inside, black-and-white-checked floors - no one at tape-counter - along floor to booth - Darin and I share one side - joshed was

so she could look at us both.

We read menus - she couldn't decide - asked us to - I looked, curious - she seemed pale - Darin and I advised - waitress took orders - I sipped decaf - talk slowed, shallowed out - pulses in everything, I thought - other directions.

Looked up.

She was looking at Darin, fixed.

I saw rapture.

She was completely filled.

Her eyes went to me - turned guarded, sparkle gone.

It pierced my heart.

She'd never looked at me thus.

And seeing me, she'd faded.

I knew, even in moment, we'd been marked by difficult beginning - little flashes of paradise-fields but more button-pushing - work to clear buttons' bases - Mira and I'd found joy so easily - and I appreciated Gabrielle's consent, to my roots.

I'd given Gabrielle all my enthusiasm - shown devotion in staying - and what I'd fought for and never found, she showed him, after no time or labor.

I knew, but was lurching into another world, as in a faint - my heart hugged itself - thought of the plane - daemon said nothing - perhaps did, unheard - loud were the emotive cries.

How could she not know?

Why did she not care?

Why to him - and not to me?

I felt anger - not at her, nor him - below, there breathed a single word.

{ *unjust* }

Then, came awareness of other-side - why I'd read in polyamory, talked to people who'd lived it - Reich'd taught me that emotional experiences have their own energies, rooted in body - Lawrence, that they have their own structures - Gabrielle, that the soul is mutable as well as firm.

So I knew, fundamentally, this would pass. Still, my heart clutched - anger and sadness.

I made myself breathe, talk, engage - it was better.

Gabrielle didn't look at me with stars-in-eyes - but there was no guardedness.

And though my stomach was nervous, and my heart hurt, I could work with that.

Dinner, dessert, after-chat - we all got up - they looked at each other.

I could act against fear, bring positive ways to fore.

"Why don't you guys walk back together? It's a romantic foggy night."

I felt better instantly.

They looked at each other, then me - smiled, together - no exclude. She reached, touched my arm. "You're sure that's okay? We can all go back."

"I want to. You guys're just beginning - you need time!"

We hugged at door - they turned left, toward water.

I wheeled right, strode up Geary.

Shape of home before me, I crossed street, walked up steps.

I busied myself - Mira asleep in Boston, leaving next day - didn't even think to call her.

I sat at desk - walked toward kitchen, cats scattering before me - returned, glass of milk - looked out window, sat down again - to window few times, next thirty minutes - felt part of mind trying to find offense, rule broken - told myself to stop - element turned silent - I mused on complex systems, from various eras, of which we're made.

I sat - wandered through news stories, Citylights journals, offshoots - wondered if Jocelyn's giant site still existed somewhere - mused on 'net ephemerality - waited, now at ease.

Looked again - shapes, downhill - walking up to Geary - stopped at

building-entrance - put arms round, kissed passionate - I felt stirring - not aroused, not jealous - refreshed, at physicality of it, as if this could be trusted - he walked off to bus-stop across street - she stood 'til he'd crossed, waved, unlocked gate, went inside to steps.

I let blinds fall as she came in the front door.

17 February 2001.

We stayed up almost all night, talking.

In middle, she got few sleep-hours - then came rawest hours of our time together - spoke of past, of times that'd hurt, their weight - no hysteria, but several times close to breaking up, sure gulf uncross - yet, again, sitting up, close to one another, on our sleigh-bed, broke through.

After some sleep-hours, we readied to go to Saturday breakfast.

Walking into sunshine, I reflected on something polyamory people'd said: if one could handle what it exposed, was huge chance for growth.

I wondered how Gabrielle'd grow from me-and-Mira.

Home, later - Mira, in mid-bustle of travel, called.

Words burst like white skylarks. "Dearest, I might be moving out to Oregon to dance for a while!"

Same coast - close - mobile, following the dancing-dream - she'd be near Andrea, in Portland - city I'd been long curious.

So, Boston it wasn't - perhaps wander, follow inspiration paths, like traveling troupe in Venetian days - kind of thing Gabrielle and I'd talked of for years.

We talked, long as could - told Darin-meeting - she, silent, enthralled - Gabrielle's fade - she quietly wished could hug, imagined heartbreak, never wanted me to feel it - told of near-break - wanted to hold me - we spoke long, tender - hung up, laughing gently, whispering love.

Thoughts of Mira rose and fell.

I spoke of her to friends, more freely than before.

Evening - video store - *Chasing Amy* - see what Gabrielle'd see about Mira - wanted to feel presence that much more.

As titles rolled, we held hands - I smiled at the day - Mira away but so present, so future.

18 February 2001.

I woke little after sunrise - later, phone rang - Mira - quietly said she'd called instant could - had to hide - for parents - we whispered endearments, talked of summer and Oregon.

Listened to her intent voice - saw sun lifting over hill-blocked towers - city stretching its arms as she told more of her faith.

I spoke of college-summer days in New Jersey - around 1986 - sometimes bicycled to UU church in Ridgewood - old man who puttered around grounds'd let me in to play the Steinway - after, sit with me, talk of the religion, teach me basics - I figured old Ken for gardener, out of shed, dirt on hands and pants.

She'd to go - we couldn't wait for next - rang off like joy-spies.

Gabrielle and I leaned by our doors, talked of Mira, her parents, hard childhoods - I'd heard many among Rand-touched - wanted fresh air - departed - Great Highway, then Coast Highway through Devil's Slide - said I wished 1910s coast railroad'd lasted - south - Half Moon Bay.

We parked on short bluff - walked down - horses on sand - petted in booming spray-off from surf - walked among logs - sea-weed - looked landward - wide beds of Ice Plant - salt-tolerator with thick wedge-leaves, purple flower with yellow sun-heart.

And then we walked in sand and spray and light.

Driving north - deep embankment into hills going into Devil's Slide - I leaned back in sun - quoted to Gabrielle words that fit this noon.

Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

She smiled, pressed hand as we plunged in roller-coaster dips and jumps and weaves, quickly toward the city.

Sky Chef lunch - cool-tone harmony of plate-glass, lemon walls - spoke of polyamory - further hungers, she said, for more sexual adventure - I approved in spirit, said we'd to avoid fades - walls between us, happenings outside us'd bring failure - no don't-ask-don't-tell - she considered, said walls largely past - glad, I said, but'd to make sure - we returned home - she called new personal-ad man - prolonged happy call in her office.

As she talked, I wanted to hear Mira, but knew I'd not again this day. I was restless - wanted purpose.

So, as phone call went on, I began to survey my writing through years - looked, wondered what'd come, what I'd go to, meet in what middle and, together, make a birth.

It was time for a book. I knew nothing else.

19 February 2001.

I went to work, followed patterns I'd done sleepless. Late afternoon, thanked Harry for job-offer, said I couldn't.

That evening, Mira sneaked love-note - I replied, as brief, as intense.

Later, Catherine imparted astonishing news: under pressure, Jocelyn'd opened. Her dislike and distrust of me, she'd said, stemmed from single incident: I'd sexually propositioned her, and she'd rejected me.

I called Gabrielle in, showed - she exclaimed, shocked - Catherine'd to leave, soon after - I stood, paced, spoke angrily - friendship'd obviously meant far less to her - Gabrielle hugged, said detachers weren't for me.

Thought of Rand's lying to the world about her affair with young Branden - something there, I told Gabrielle - something centrally off in

the crystal metropolis.

In time, she went back to her office.

I sat, drained - missing Mira, our purity - after few minutes, realized, little dawn, something truly good'd come from them after all.

I felt better - memory, telling of Ken - pulled a book he'd gifted me - spelled his name in search engine - clicked "fetch" - screen loaded with entries - began with first.

I turned very still.

Ken of the grass-stained pants - Kenneth Patton - humanist lion, controversialist, bringer of poetry, cosmology, multiculturalism into what a writer called a previous "monotone rationalism" in the faith.

His entry in *Britannica* - wasn't only a central figure in their liturgical history - he'd played large role in merger of Unitarian and Universalist churches in 1961.

I'd never known. Mira's faith - and he'd shaped, almost created. I sent a note, told her.

Evening, told Gwen - wondered, refreshed, if links'd ever end - what I'd thought several times, preceding weeks - "when I think of the boy in military school, who'd nothing and no one" - Gwen said teasingly she'd surprise me soon, would say no more.

My eye fell on things I'd brought from Boston - kept on shelf closest to desk - things she'd touched - only physical things I had.

I began to hurt - missed her, nakedly - wanted to reach, past barriers of parents, distance, time - just hold her.

I knew I'd to bide time, wait in patience.

As I settled in bed, I said, curious, "What? You look like you're ready to give birth to something."

"Well," she said, smile fixed, "I've decided to take things a little further with Darin. I was thinking tonight, I've got love-feelings for this man, so

I want to get deeper in him and see what's there."

I froze.

Then, realizing I'd wakened in strange landscape, tried to orient. Couldn't see him as inspirer of passion.

I asked her where it was coming from.

Few factors, she said. He was introvert, she said - akin, as Mira was to me in extroversion -

{ *too easy* }

- and much of the rest frankly was sexual.

"He just instinctively knows what to do with me. He's an expert somehow - it's all so weirdly perfect."

She'd spoken in innocent openness, but I'd to ask. "Has it ever been perfect with you and me?"

She paused, smile fading.

"No - but it could be."

My heart twisted - instantly entered grey pain - turned from her - breath shuddered - something wrong - wasn't supposed to - we'd been together for Mira.

{ *unjust* }

She stroked me - fingers, palms - said we could match it - our personality conflict'd just been so much.

This was worse - no problem aiming higher - but would not compete, not *match*.

Couldn't discern all in play - knew I was being tossed-about - none of the care I'd shown her.

I turned, told my feelings - we held each other, returned, before long, tender.

But something was gone out of me.

When I went to sleep, I was less.

20 February 2001.

Drove in - fogs above, blue sky around - no interest - Mira-contact'd balm - even with Gabrielle'd be okay - I'd read of - frightening energy, new relationships.

Veterans' Cemetery - eucalypti - green leaves, silver trunks - work - voicemail - Goosie - give my mother's new test-results - voice clipped, business - warmth, at end - loved me.

I shut loan-price door - on speaker - no worse, no better, just comfortable - ready, I said, to come as needed - she knew - keep things calm - would call when time - said we loved each other - she hung up - I clicked off.

I returned to business' rational structures - knew not why, but call was like tectonic rip in fabric of day.

My desk - mail - Mira-letter - as if she'd known my need - relieved, I opened.

She wrote, she said, in nervousness - she and Nick'd met night before - "wound up making out for three hours" on the couch - feared my anger - knew fully we hadn't asked ahead of time - wanted to be sure we'd be alright.

After past four days, I could take anything - altogether, it passed smoothly.

Yet - sentence lingered - "It's going to be a very interesting summer" - faint small tinge of fingers-pressed-to-chin - I'd not had from her before.

I replied rapidly: we needed to talk that night.

She sent quick answer - would call if possibly could.

Afternoon, Gabrielle and I grabbed moments to talk - she'd made evening date with a personal-ad man.

When I saw she'd somehow not grasped how crushing night-before'd

been, I knew I was in exactly what I despised: strife with loved one.

Walking into coming dusk, to my car, I carried the reality of Mira-and-me as soldiers carry photos of a girl in their billfolds.

At home, we hugged - looked into each other's eyes - in that moment, at least, were alright.

We sat, talked - she seemed to understand - by end was saying, "I can cancel, just spend it with you!" - I, "No, it's okay, so long as we're in good contact."

She left - downtown bus - before long, phone - Mira - I said, firm, summer-declare'd bothered me - these weren't unilateral decisions - we'd to make them together.

"Oh, I know, love! I'm really sorry it happened before we talked. Was just a moment's spur, really."

I smiled, knew she'd feel it. "I know, I'm not hung up on it - just want us to stay perfect." I walked as I talked - at boundary between two rooms, I felt seriousness in me, stopped. "Mira, in Boston, for me - the earth moved. I met you, and it moved."

"Oh, beloved," she said, voice muffled by tears - "it was the same for me. The same."

We spoke warmly of Boston - I asked after sex-problem - no better, she said, no worse - sympathized - said my drive'd been like iron before Beth's cancer-recur, irregular after her death then contend with Gabrielle.

"Physical love will return to us," I said, feeling peace. "I know it."

"I do not doubt it, beloved. I don't. That's a lovely turn of phrase. Wherefrom?"

Nineteenth century, I said. We began to talk of era, but problem lingered with me - visualized her body inside - what should've been bright flows of energy - wondered what'd block her from acme. "Wait. You're on Celexa, right?"

"Yes, ever since around New Year's."

"I know what it is. You're overprescribed!"

She asked meaning - I told memory - type of drug linked to orgasm-

suppression in women. "I'm telling you, this is it. Go to your doctor, get your dose adjusted."

"That'd fit - I felt like crap after Taylor, it all started then. Michael, thank you!"

"It's my pleasure." I laughed, trifle suggestive. "And it'll be - my pleasure."

"Hey, our pleasure!"

"Of course, unless you've forgotten."

"I've forgotten nothing, mister."

"Good. Because I absolutely refuse to let you-and-Nick have a monopoly in the simultaneous orgasm department."

She breathed in, deeper. I felt desire stirring in us. "Speaking of," I said, "how're things with him?"

"They're okay. Still thinking it all over. Give me a few days, okay?"

I said of course - whatever it took.

Soon, she had to go.

Front door opened, early - heard her walk to bedroom - perhaps taking off coat, I thought. I went out, stood in doorway.

She was removing shoe. I said, "Fast date."

"No date," she said. "I got stood up."

"Bastard."

We looked at one another, had to laugh.

Told of Celexa, hopes for future - recalled something she'd said once: I'd never had a relationship of pure sexual passion.

Sex was the great question of my life.

I had to solve it. I wanted to - with Gabrielle, with Mira.

Remembered her, in this room, saying something'd come I'd sought. She asked why I smiled. "It feels good, being chaste with her right now. Chastity is an under-rated thing."

"Stops leaks when things aren't right."

"We had to make love that once - to put a seal on things. Now, there's more time. I'm glad it happened, and glad we're where we are right now."

She looked at me warmly.

"You two are so good together," she said.

21 February 2001.

Next day work-full - Harry and Randy learned my projects - little contacts with Gabrielle that were wholly good.

In between, deep calm in writing Mira - in Denver that day, and as her mail'd been down no morning note - told her of wanting new music, about bar with world music - perhaps I'd go dance - talked of theatre resources on West Coast.

my impression is that the west coast balanchine effect of which you told me holds true in music and drama. the spirit of the place doesn't support full abstraction, hence doesn't support the apollonian perfection sought in new york or boston high-art circles. california is too much of the soil, even now, even in silicon valley.

Nick-thought came - I wanted to say something - slight nerves, being half-continent away.

no matter what happens, i will be thinking of both of you, warmly. if you'd like us to talk of it afterward, just tell me a time.

At end, I told of my talk about chastity. Then, in simplicity, I just signed my name.

That afternoon, Mira-letter arrived - she'd decided.

She was going to have to break Nick's heart.

Having been with me, she couldn't conceive of going out with him again. Our relationship, she declared, was the standard by which all should to be measured.

I trembled in joy.

Late afternoon - phone all day - wanted to use hands, express change physically - cleaned desk - threw out old pencils, pocketed gritty pennies, looked at notes from brokers - memos, jots from long-ago meetings, ideas for improvement - looked in file-cabinet - so much - traces of things that'd mattered, or'd seemed to.

Thought of throwing out, starting fresh.

Got up, went to file-storage in back, got cardboard boxes, organized, packed all up.

Quit-time, carried boxes to car - trunk, back seat - drove - straightened onto Great Highway - to right, apartment buildings, big-window houses - left, grassy dunes and breaker mist and sun - my future before, and past behind.

Gabrielle and I spoke of next days - she wanted time with Darin, so she'd planned Friday lunch - after work his apartment - stay 'til morning - I saw empty apartment, bed lonely - then memory: her generosity, time after time.

There'd be friends to talk, Mira to write, Ingrid in East Bay - hadn't seen in ages - Gabrielle'd come home knowing more.

I said I wanted us-time before Friday - we figured dinner for Ingrid-and-me next evening, Gabrielle join coffee later, then home early, for time just ours.

22 February 2001.

Mira's voice in pale dawn - excited - told her mother more of us, openly - it'd been absolutely good - it was certain I'd meet that summer.

Rest of day, everything glowed.

We sat at window-table, catching up - jasmine rice, deep curry bowls - told of Darin - she lost introvert thinker-judger reserve, told hilarious anecdotes of relationships-gone-by - memory of Mira's sweet fear at coming-friend - began telling how it'd begun - Ingrid wonder-filled, asked details - we'd finished, dessert possible, when she spoke.

"That's a good story, Michael. You should write it down sometime."

We skipped dessert - walked blocks - told of her business-plans - pointed at Darin-table - sat down at another - before long Gabrielle in windows - came, hugged - to counter, bought, sat round, sipped mugs - Ingrid told me again to write it - Gabrielle smiled, agreed.

Under the stars we walked - waited at stop - bus flowed downhill - we hugged, she got on, in back - when downtown she'd change for gleaming subway - waved happily until only bus-back and tight sliver of side.

The pedestrian signal changed to "walk."

Gabrielle and I stepped onto Geary.

I thought of Ingrid's idea.

23 February 2001.

Mira's voice, morning - faintly tired, wispy - no headlong focus - spoke of pressure about us - discomfort from family and friends, criticisms by Citylighters - was fed up as I was.

I couldn't wait - return to Boston - she sighed, agreed - "times that try men's souls," I quoted - told her we'd make it - she agreed - she rang off - I jumped into bed, cuddled Gabrielle awake - then shower, strong streams.

I hugged, kissed at door - miss her but hoped was wonderful.

Then to work-swirl.

Randy urged me to solicit loans throughout San Francisco once gone. I smiled.

Late afternoon - light on walls and floors, sidewalk footsteps, traffic-

sounds dry-resonant, echoing - solitude good.

Ingrid's idea came to me - went to Jocelyn's new 'net-journal - read - fed up with her poses.

I began to type - ripped her maunderings - told the depth of this love - feelings, still no events - spoke of ruined friendship - spaded into her psychology of twisting.

When done, looked at clock - several hours - went to her latest entry - she'd a bad cold - and posted my words.

Walked into rain night - Big Heart - turkey, potatoes, peas, steamed cauliflower, gravy - Zen stories from '50s paperback - Coke in tumbler - lights, movies - at ease with it all.

I went home, straight to bed, and slept like a top.

24 February 2001.

White light - sun, diffused to purer, gentler whiteness by fog-clouds - odd, waking alone - yet brought life-in-its-own-right - simple feeling of living.

I stretched, rose, checked - Jocelyn'd replied - one terse paragraph - stated she never spoke of Mira or of me - solely about herself.

Thought of squids' defense-methods - Mira called - told - she was proud, looked forward to hiding less - we whispered our love, as if compressed - before I knew it, gone.

Into early-afternoon I looked into Jocelyn-history - letters, chats - felt quiet, almost affectless disbelief - no pleasure in her deterioration - it pained me.

But new life - Gabrielle walked in, exhausted, happy-flushed - get instantly to singing lesson - told her return soon as possible, wanted to make love to her - she smiled, promised right back - we kissed, passionate, at door.

At desk, delved - lost time in times gone - later, realized she was overdue - dialed teacher - asked if still there - teacher put her on the line - I asked, confused, if lesson'd run over - no, she said, they'd just been chatting, about hour and a half.

My heart crashed into my stomach.

I asked her to come home, choked voice.

She said okay.

I hung up - tried to read, but everything surface, even nervousness in stomach.

About thirty minutes later, she came in the front door.

I walked out. She was standing by bedroom door, face pale and guilty.

I looked at floor, spoke quietly. "You were there for an hour and a half - chatting?"

I looked up.

She nodded.

I bit down my teeth.

My eyes and lips drew tighter.

I felt blood-heat beginning to rise.

I felt hatred. Not her - this in her.

I stood, arms crossed - she spoke - couldn't reach me - I saw the very devil - retraction from passion - if there'd been target, my emotion'd've burned through - but that was the problem - diffused diffuser, everywhere and nowhere - trying to box with fog.

Before long we hugged, spoke tenderly.

But, under - fabric stretched and fallen back, droopy - no more desire - felt - and hated this, too - her droop in me.

In time I went back into my office, sat at my desk.

She'd been so awake - why now? this? was I always to know hints of sexual rebirth - and a scudding cloud when I reached for her?

Yet to be with her felt right - to leave wrong, tragic.

I cursed the intuitive path.

That evening, I expanded search of my past with the Citylighters - talked with Gabrielle - no shine now to hearing about of Darin - late call with my mother - bright-voiced, said tests still the same, tumors only growing a little, life filled, so busy - she drifted slightly, laughed - "I'm being a space cadet, floating away!" - spoke of busyness, days passing, blurring,

spoke so lightly, happily, no pain-drug.

I shuddered - old words, remembered - that these are the days of our lives - I promised to see her soon - said we loved each other.

Tiredness came - lay by Gabrielle - talked of all - felt better, if blunt, but jagged day ended jagged, and sleep was troubled.

25 February 2001.

I woke up stiff, congested - film over world - I felt non-unified internally - got up, quiet for sleeper - realized my natural sparkle of mood wasn't - some of day before's greyness, was.

There'd be good, though - day's end, Mira in Boston - so I bore the flattened hours.

Phone rang, evening - her voice tumbled - "Michael! I talked to my minister - he knew Ken Patton - he *worked* with him!"

I laughed, drudges gone - told recents with Gabrielle - sympathetic, instantly - told anger - quietly understood - told latest movement in my mother's descent - "So much is going, love," I said - she wished we could hug.

We talked for almost two hours - soon I'd hold her again, lips on mine - walk the streets - she'd dance at the School, at night our bodies press together strong, warm, and alive.

Gabrielle and I - bed - talked, kissed gently - desire stirred in dark - we touched - my injured passion rose, slow, tentative - soon I entered her - striving - all my heart.

Her body responded warmly, softly - I moved steadily - told, almost whisper, I loved her - she said nothing - few moments later, I said "Darling?"

I realized she'd fallen asleep - said her name sharply - she woke, disoriented - I told what'd happened - she tried to console, sleepy sex could be great - I leaped from bed, slammed door behind - went into my of-

fice, needed to destroy - smashed door shut - thunder in quiet building - stood absolute still - knew I might raise hand to her, so held myself, apart, until it'd passed.

I pulled at door - squealed, swung oddly - damaged - split down middle, paint chips on floor - walked to bedroom. She was waiting for whatever I'd to say.

I said quietly she might not intend, but it was mind-fuck - knew well she wasn't falling asleep on Darin - had fought hard for my sexuality, our relationship - no problem with keeping on, but she'd to meet me - with this day and day before, I'd a problem.

I asked if she didn't feel passion I did - she did, but much of time couldn't get at it - told her to let me help - said I would, but wouldn't live without passion - she nodded, and it wasn't empty gesture.

Began talking of her blocks - she felt overwhelmed - I pushed every defense-mechanism - nothing that worked with anyone else worked with me - seemed I only wanted highest good - like climbing to needle-point of huge mountain, airless, no ground.

I got back in bed - we talked, arms around each other, a bit newly naked.

But more of my passion was gone.

Or drawn into itself.

When sleep came, it was neither restless nor restful.

It was just oblivion.

❧

26 February 2001.

I drove in mood of duty - not job - long-faded - but day's things - inspiration'd return - uphill path - slow, burdened march.

Gabrielle and I healed - notes, brief calls - asked if okay my seeing Mira before April's second week - "absolutely" - chased fares, found - arrive 20 March, depart four days later - bought. I needed it.

That night, watched Gabrielle rehearse - *fin de siècle* Fauré harmonies - mused on uncertain ground of the present - my life 'tween march, dance, song.

Over it all, timeless, bright, stood the star of Mira-and-me.
To that I could look up, and steer by.

27 & 28 February 2001.
Our love'd brought continuous weeks of blue-sky days to walk into. At February's end came two murk-days.

We were well at bottom - clouds rolled from circumstance only: bookstore, for summer money - School's redoubled work - so contacts not rare - but brief, telegraph.

There was else - job winding down - my mother and I talked often, wall part-breached - she held stronger, steadier - Gabrielle and I discussed all that'd happened - no worse, no better - she didn't see Darin, mainly due to schedules.

In those strange days, I was attentive to every event - but, after, couldn't place all on sequence-map as to time.

On map, toward month's end, a small mesa - on it, two pillars. Here, in order, are the inscriptions.

Of unknown date - c. 24 February 2001.
On phone, night - she spoke of sex-problem - I said that's what exploring was for - she laughed, said, "These other relationships'll be good for us - they'll make me more fun for you!"

Of unknown date - c. 28 February 2001.
We'd good morning'd - told of coming day - said she'd news - voice rhythmic - "I masturbated today" - now fast, crisp - "and I attained orgasm." - tone almost impersonal - I asked if okay, sounded far-off - she laughed - all well - been too long - sweet thoughts garlanded themselves: our really making love.

I asked if any in mind to explore with - she said no, not really - asked who possibly - she seemed vague, adrift - asked to whom, day-to-day, most basically attracted - "Well, that'd be Jonathan Wilson at work." - never'd heard, asked what like - "Well, he's a yummy creature - but that's as far as it goes. I know literally nothing about the man."

I said he sounded likely - see if interested - she asked if I was sure - of course - we plotted how to find out - she spoke of chocolate party - her apartment, Sunday - invite friends over, hope he'd accept - real purpose'd be his seduction.

I felt stir of arousal - beneath, or at its side, a curl of forlorn - wish we'd be enjoying chocolate, seduction, and pleasure - but this was for that.

I told how it sounded - rich, and decadent, and good.

❧

1 March 2001.

Early-morning, chatted long - filled in overflowing light.

I told in detail of Gabrielle-travails - Mira deeply concerned - had hoped I'd have just bit of break from troubles - wished could've held me during bad night - wasn't to exhaust myself, get sick, no matter how intense got with Gabrielle - hard to watch from afar.

If she knew I was intact, inside and out, be easier - she loved me so much - hard to see me hurting, harder she could do nothing - made her heart-sore - confessed to being weepy and worrisome.

I was big boy, able care for self - she grumbled knowing didn't make easier - soon, I'd to leave - thanked her for all - every moment, every word - loved her like bright sunshine.

As I drove off, I felt met again. The clouds could begin to part.

Turned on computer - AIM went on - she wrote instantly, before I could click it off.

This was as our first: long-arc, focus on present, delight in each other's well-doing - yet more grittily applied, as if full-come to earth.

As we talked, in heart-touch, I felt more directly droop with Gabrielle - sagged - told her - felt bit flat, bleak - not horrid, just empty - tired of slog, like long hike in dark without food - she didn't retract - stayed

- awake, loving, strong.

She'd to go, do things about apartment - said'd be back.

Flat hours passed, and I stood them.

That afternoon, Gwen asked if now'd be good for a surprise.

I said I'd welcome it.

She'd been inspired by my resigning - wanted to find something with her heart in it - so'd applied for new job - that happened to be far above what she'd thought her level.

She refused to say one more thing.

I clapped my hands, said I'd tell Mira when in the bag.

Before day-end, checked journals - Mira's first in three weeks - titled "Whispers" - began with quote of U2's "Walk On," from memory.

> *And love is not the easy thing …*
> *The only baggage you can bring*
> *Is all that you can't leave behind.*

I caught, periph-down, the first paragraph was about us. With peerless concision and word-choice, she caught it.

On the Sunday of Michael's visit, which was a few weeks ago now, he and I decided that we wanted to get out of the city.
In short order we rented a car and, without map or directions, ventured north, through the forests of New England, which seem to line all the highways here. We had but one clear goal: to see the ocean. So through a process of trial and error and some following of road signs, we came to a point where we broke through the forest into a wide flat area dotted with houses, through which a creek ran, and marshy grasses grew upon it. And we drove along in the orange light of the setting sun, and found ourselves among the gables of Hampton Beach, N.H.

She went on to evoke town, sea, statue - music-climax and gulls rising - she'd them happening at same moment - spoke of us and statue keeping vigil together.

It was long entry - she'd taken no notes - wondered how much else she remembered - great pure clarity - I wanted nothing of those sacred days forgotten.

She spoke of gull-climax as premonition of things coming - immense forces, self finding itself amid this world of great powers and meanings - she wanted all life'd to offer - tasted life on her tongue, stranger-wilder than before - ferality of when I'd told dark dream hadn't disappeared - it'd waited, fit itself under her skin - and she liked it.

Reading it was like her fingertips on me.

I went forth into evening, met Gabrielle more strongly, and things went better for it.

Near midnight, gratitude moved - wrote note - thanked Mira for presence, for openness and strength, for love, for weeks of unforeseen beauty, for what was coming for us.

I went to bed, to sleep, held in it all.

2 March 2001.

I was welcome, she wrote - every word, gesture, touch, thought - welcome to each and all - wrote of grey morning sky - snow-dust - occasionally flake'd drift from sky, like late guest to crowded party.

This day she'd work - meet Ted, friend, for little fun - return home 6pm - bit before 10pm Jeremiah'd pick up - evening gown, elbow-length gloves, pearls, all - for black-tie chocolate party at MIT - likely out late, so hoped we'd talk in window.

I'd'd no idea Boston'd so many chocolate parties.

I realized - amid towered clouds in almost every sector of my life - I'd no worry, no fear with Mira.

A new adventure, beginning.

At desk, home-office, evening - piece of paper I'd against wall - see from desk - jots - phone call - round 22 February.

Feb 25th return
Dave & Tara Mar 3-9
Dennis Mar ? 10-18
Catherine ? April-May

Dave and Tara - Colorado-friends - visiting - been ages - warned she'd not be much around - she, Tara'd fallen-out - now mending - first visit in year-and-half - then friend Dennis - Catherine, vague plans.

Between these posts, Mira'd exhorted, we'd meet as often as possible.

I got paper, turned over - two bits - same call. She'd talked with her mother on possible long-term problems with us -

1 not enough life experiences - will run out of things

- feared, her having experienced so little, me so much, we'd run out of things to talk about - I'd said with her hunger for knowing, experience, how our minds synergized, we'd complement beautifully - she'd paused, considering - said yes, I was constant student of life too and it was silly of her.

2 very long term - mortality

- worried, far down our road, I'd die long before, leave her alone after amazing life together - she'd thought it out - concluded in time that life unpredictable - make most of it, and it'd be worth it.

❧

3 March 2001.

Saturday morning - early - stretched - went into my office - looked out blinds - hand-shaded eyes - people on sidewalks, buses blowing up and down Geary.

I sat - new Mira-journal - 2am - title, daring for her, "Of Touch and Sex" - opened with quote - Citylighter journals often did.

Give me the democracy of touch, the resurrection of the body.
- D.H. Lawrence

Early-arrived puberty - rude whistles, catcalls from men before ten - changed on finding UU-linked youth group - finally experienced touch in safe way - spoke approvingly of inculcating in young males idea that sex was sacred.

MIT-party - Jeremiah'd slipped in quick "Love ya" at farewell few days before - they'd talked about nature of their friendship - been quick, clear, positive - she wasn't, she wrote, looking for a relationship - had emotional grounding and support from me, her parents, friends - was ready to try casual, non-exclusive dating, free from expectation - some things so simple, she said, yet we make them so complicated.

Gabrielle woke - no word from Darin about seeing her perform that evening - nearly lunch, he told her the theatre troupe needed him that night.

All afternoon I was keyed up.

Late afternoon quivered on evening-edge - western sky streaks of near-purple out to horizon - I drove Gabrielle down to the Peninsula.

I sat in church. As orchestra, then chorus, began to breathe the *In Paradisum* - his musical portrayal of heaven itself - tears began to run down my cheeks.

Inside me, a voice said love must never die. Somehow, I'd make it through, again.

On drive home, I was restless, not knowing.

I walked directly through to my office.

She'd written - could only write briefly - party'd begun - Jonathan'd come - she looked forward to eventful night.

Then there came the last words of her message.

and i'll have a jonathan to cuddle with :P

I looked at those words, and a strange tremor passed.

It was the first message she'd sent with no bright salutation, no affection, no loving close.

Why the pantomimed tongue?

I told myself not to worry.

Before long, worry passed.

Soon after, I fell asleep.

The first dream was brief.

It took place on the East Coast, aboard a fast long-distance train.

I was late for departure and almost did not make it.

At a station stop I got out and dawdled on the station platform.

It left without me.

The second dream was longer.

I was with Wilhelm Reich.

He'd been having strange experiences while asleep.

He showed me the envelopes he'd addressed, in sleep, to various people.

Reich was driven, masculine despite his faith in softness and flow.

Yet his writing here was feminine, frilly.

He'd inked in some letterforms like a child - with soft-colored rainbow shadings.

4 March 2001.

I woke up, and they were with me.

I stretched long, rose. On way to desk, I realized dream-aura, too - all just a bit more vivid.

ICQ - from Mira - nerve-flare as I opened.

I love you, darling.
I have much to tell you.
I will call you tonight.

Hugs,
Mira

My emotions stumbled slightly - she'd known I'd want to know - why wait?

I felt nervous at still-restrained tone.

Told myself to calm - she'd said'd be busy, probably just tired and stretched.

Still, slight pulse of irk.

Went back to research - found resource - archive of billions of web pages, new and old - found, began to read in sequence, the mad excess that'd been Jocelyn's.

So, the beginnings again.

Out with Gabrielle - coffee, walk in sun, look in store-windows, listen - breeze in trees, cars on Park Presidio.

Into store - beads, stones, easels, paints - kit for necklace with amulet - ankh, slight Celtic notes - bought for Mira - fun to hand-make something for her.

Returned - Gabrielle rehearsed - still bit in dream-aura, I mused on Ingrid's idea.

The Fauré - mid-afternoon - again, miracle - *In Paradisum*, realized one thing notated art makes possible is regular return of miracles.

I drove back, internal-rich - she asked, voice easy, if she might see Darin. I consented - needed to see if our talks'd bear fruit. She left on downtown bus.

Mid-evening, near end of Jocelyn-site - felt overworded, lonesome.

Wrote Mira on ICQ - ears were peeled - ring'd hail voice I missed - eager to hear all - I loved her.

At around 9pm, phone rang.

I asked how she was - she detailed she-Dave-Tara's doings for minutes, until it began to feel impossible. I gently asked what'd happened, party.

She and Jonathan'd left, gone to her room, stayed up until 5am - talking, touching, making out. "We discovered deep philosophical overlaps between us," she said. "We both believe in becoming bigger people."

"So, what's he like?"

"Well, he's pierced and tattooed!"

I listened. She said nothing more.

"What's his energy like?"

She spoke rapidly and evenly.

"His energy is dark, as yours is light. He doesn't have the rapid, facile self-awareness of a Citylighter. He answers questions slowly, and sometimes he'll not answer and it has to be dragged from him. It seems to come out of a great depth inside him."

"Mira, are we okay? This feels strange."

Her voice turned careful.

"I miss you, but - my life in Boston is very full."

"I'm going to call it a night," I said. "I need some time to think and ease into this."

"Okay," she said, confused, suddenly brightened, sped up, as if calling after retreating car, "I love you!"

"Night night" I said.

I hung up, quickly.

I walked to the bed, lay down atop, and considered.

5 March 2001.

Phone rang me out of sleep.

I ignored it.

I lay, remembered dreams, let thoughts stream as they would. I wanted to be ready for whatever came this day.

Minutes later, I rose - it'd been Mira - sober-tinted, asked I call when I could.

I dialed.

We hello'd - she said she was uncomfortable with how rapidly our call'd ended - I said I'd not been angry or even felt badly - mainly confused, needed time to settle - unheard, with us.

She said in strong voice I'd nothing to worry about - I apologized - she said was alright.

Amiably she updated briefly on her and Jonathan: mostly just actively hanging out with Dave and Tara, nothing to report - she and Dave and Tara'd be occupied next days, so still less contact.

We said goodbye. I showered, threw on clothes.

I drove, looked from above smoggy valley of wealth - thin lines of bridges - bright sunrays off water miles away - thirty miles off, Mount Diablo - behind it, continent.

Remembered a line - minor motto of my and Beth's - Zalman King film - we'd called movie trash, but this'd stuck: "I don't know where I'm going - but I can't wait to get there."

I walked in.

Nothing from Gabrielle - sent note asking how she was.

Gwen and I greeted - I called myself well - Mira and I'd gone through small rite of passage past night, morning - come out better for it. She cheered - she'd wanted night's talk to go smoothly.

She'd to go for a few hours.

I said goodbye.

The computer fell silent.

Citylighter-journals showed no changes.

I went work-immersed, as if staying.

I'd spent years this way.

Near lunch, work quiet and busy, letter from Gabrielle.

I opened while juggling other screens, began to read, snapped into shock.

Hi Darling -
Things are busy at work so I haven't had time to write! Things with Darin are great and more than great - last night was incredible sexually and emotionally. We talked about the distance we feel when we aren't together, and how to remedy that, and to that end we are trying to set a date for a weekend trip sometime soon to spend more time together.
He is totally there, and things feel really wonderful. I feel more secure than I did before about him, and I am noticing places where I am spacing out and not always being all the way real with him. Sometimes I talk compulsively out of insecurity, and I am catching myself doing that. I do it to fill up spaces where intimacy might occur.

She couldn't wait to see me in evening, talk about it, be with me and love me. She closed, "I hope you are having a good day! - Love, G"

I knew there was no cruelty. It was innocent. Her words at the end were as real as those in the beginning.

But I'd not stand it any longer.

I cast away our ships' mooring-lines.

Jim Morrison's words came.

This is the end
Beautiful friend

I went through work shaking sometimes.

I was in deep poignancy - and strange peace.

❧

We walked through dusk toward Sky Chef - almost ginger, near-silent, her arm looped round mine - clouds going orange and purple - color-gaps, blue of night-turning sky.

Walked in - owner greeted loudly - no customers - rounded, window table - menus - dim tension, ordered - she hustled off, by paintings by daughter - once waitress, now gone to great Art Institute - spoke order to husband - steam kitchen noise.

I looked into Gabrielle's eyes, breathed in slowly, and began.

I didn't want this, for anyone, but I'd to discover why she was asleep to me - and if she could wake.

So I forced on, through obscurities.

We spoke straight and true and kind - but her feeling-labyrinth led to single horrible conclusion: that she wasn't in love with me, never'd been. She seemed to have two different selves with Darin and me - they touched at no point.

I felt black sickness, inside and out.

We paid, somehow - walked to apartment in stunned silence, darker sky out over ocean. I felt covered in iron weights. I might vomit on the sidewalk.

Thought of Mira - wanted to be away from this dying, in her arms again, clean and joyful.

But not yet. I'd to see this through, for all our sakes.

We walked up, then inside - couch, sat together, looked in each other's eyes - again, weight vanished - again, refreshed regard for goodness of this brave soul.

We weren't enemies. No hatred.

We'd just made a mistake.

Best I could discern, we'd thought a spiritual bond enough, that everything else'd follow - and it hadn't, couldn't.

We looked at one another.

As one, we began to weep - more transcendent gladness than sadness. We'd fought the good fight, and here was our good end.

We reached and held hands, tightly, shifting fingers.

"So what are you going to do? Go to Boston?" said Gabrielle, soft-voiced. "I think so. I told Mira I would, if things got frayed. This is a good time."

"Are we broken up?" she said. I looked at her, tenderly.

"I think so, love," I said.

She nodded. We reached to one another, hugged, close and warm. We wept harder, said we loved each other, pulled back, still close, spoke of possibly turning to one another when we'd followed other paths for a few years.

I looked into her eyes. I didn't sense we were deceiving ourselves or each other.

"I'm going to call Mira," I said, "and tell her."

"Okay," she said, "I'll write Darin."

She got up, walked round corner, into my office. From living room, I dialed, praying she'd be there.

She picked up.

I greeted - she hello'd, sounding genuinely pleased.

"Mira," I said, "I need you to make some time, because I have something important to tell you."

"Okay," she said, perplexed. "I'm sitting in the living room with Jonathan, Dave, and Tara. I can go to my room."

"Alright," I said.

As she got up, I heard key-taps begin in my office. It was becoming official very quickly.

I thought of how to phrase. She'd been edgy - I worried she might bolt.

"Mira," I said softly, "Gabrielle and I've broken up. I'm okay, it was amicable - it's really a good thing. I'm calling you now because I wanted to tell you - and because I want us to tie our fates together ..."

I paused. She said nothing more. I felt as if I were coming down on an unseen step at the end of a climb.

"... if that's what you want, too."

"Ummm," she said.

Her voice was different. Flat.

"What?" I said.

"Michael," she said, rapid, disapproving, "there is a *man in my living room I have to think about!*"

My heart froze.

It was then I knew.

The signs'd been, but in headlong flux I hadn't heeded them.

Something had gone terribly wrong.

"What do you mean?" I said.

I realized I was shaking my head back and forth unconsciously, eyes on dim corner of the room.

No anger now. "He writes me poetry. He's a brooding Romantic poet." Sudden, as if in supplication, "He calls me his muse!"

"Well, that's great," I said, "but what's that to do with us?"

She settled close to voice I'd known. "I feel like you're offering me a gift I can't accept. Our actually being together was always a misty dream to me. I never let it become real."

"It was never," I said, choking up, "a - misty dream to me."

"Michael, don't worry, it's - I can feel myself detaching from you, and I *don't like it*. I'm going to go away and work on this."

"Okay. Keep me abreast of it, because this feels really off. I don't understand what's going on. I don't know Jonathan and obviously I need to. He knows I'm going to be there on the twentieth, right?"

"Yes, he does, and knows we'll be sleeping in the same bed - which he wasn't happy about, even though I told him that we won't be having sex."

(I heard it. It entered memory. Nothing more.)

"Mira, I said if I felt us fraying, I'd close the distance. I want to do something about it."

"I know. I love you. Let me work on it, okay?"

"Okay. Stay in touch. I love you, too."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow."

We hung up.

In a moment, Gabrielle walked in.

"Sounds," she said, "like that didn't go so well."

"Weirdly. I'm not going to Boston yet. Mira says she feels herself detaching, so she's going to work on that."

I smiled meaninglessly.

She sat down next to me. "So, are we broken up?"

"I've no idea. I want what you have with Darin, and right now that seems elusive."

We hugged, soon walked off to bed, held one another.

I had a role still, but all'd have to play itself out.

And large things were in play now.

6 March 2001.

I'd gone to sleep earlier than usual, woken later - as if my body'd wanted to carry as much refreshment as possible.

Two memories came - night before - and on this date, nineteen years before, Rand had died.

Good-morning with Gwen - hugged Gabrielle - showered rapidly, dressed - flew to work.

I thought of joy's varying fragility and strength, and how it seemed to depend on something deep within.

I got into work bit late - dialed voicemail as I powered computer - left ICQ and AIM on.

Took meeting with Harry, talked strategy in old slow-moving law case. Back to my desk, checked AIM - saw, small shock, her screen-name on-line.

I moved cursor over it.

The little pop-window indicated that name had been on for nearly twenty minutes.

I sat, silently suspended.

I typed her name with question mark at end.

Instantly she replied "Hi darling!" - explained she'd restarted comput-er, hadn't realized it meant she could talk to me.

I said I'd been thinking of her, Jonathan warmly - last night'd been no ultimatum - no forced decision, now or ever - she was mainly feeling overwhelmed - hadn't imagined this, least not so soon - was wanting "flesh-side interaction" very badly - thanked me profusely for removing sense of rush - now she could figure things out.

I asked what the "flesh-side" phraseology was about.

She answered there was so much she didn't know about me, couldn't unless she got much face-to-face time. I agreed, said I wanted it just as much.

For us, she continued, to be romantic together, we needed that time, in a way start from ground zero, come in without any expectations - act in a way like two people who'd just met, just starting out - and see how we did that way.

She asked if that made sense.

I said I'd questions - did she feel we'd gotten tangled in expectations or past history or such?

No, she said, just that when or if we came together she wanted it to be fresh and new. The two of us, she said, needed to not have or build expectations about where it was going or could or would go.

I asked where it was coming from if we hadn't gotten tangled up in expectations.

She said it'd come from experience with Jeremiah and Jonathan, from wanting not to limit what could happen with the latter, and a talk she'd had with the former that morning that'd really made sense.

I said newness, freshness was something I'd always want, indeed had to have - setting a limit on what happened with Jonathan'd be perverse - no need.

She agreed wholeheartedly, felt I wouldn't limit them, truly did.

What, I asked, was Jonathan's feeling about her-and-me - was he symmetric? Mira answered he was withholding opinion until he knew more about the way we interacted.

I pantomimed a nod.

I said no more.

She needed to go to the bookstore, for work.

I typed I loved her, with a smile.

As I was sending, she said same, no smile.

I noted synchronicity - like old days again, I said.

She acknowledged with pantomimed laugh immediately followed, on next line, by bare "yes."

And then she was gone.

That afternoon, I looked at AIM again.

No reason, no stimulus.

She was online - had been for nearly ten minutes.

To start playful, I asked if she could possibly be back.

Yes, she said. Work'd closed early due to snow.

I joked she seemed positively downcast.

She did not answer.

After many minutes, I asked how she was.

Okay, she said. Very thought-filled, contemplative.

Feeling thus, I said, suited snow and sky.

Yes, she said. It did.

She said no more.

I pantomimed handing her a snow-globe with diorama of far-away place inside for her to look at.

Yes, she said. Was how she felt - kind of far away.

I said yes, pantomimed a smile.

I said no more.

Mira: how're you, my love?

Peaceful, I said, good about talk earlier. She said "good," pantomimed big smile, quiet hug. I told image of our hugging quietly in her living room. She pantomimed sigh, said she was tired, had to sleep more, play with J's less.

I told her she would when she needed to.

Yes, she said, like tonight. She called sleep very good.

I pantomimed a nod.

She wrote that she loved me -

Michael: as i love you, mira.

- Taylor was an idiot, but she'd tell me later -

Michael: please do

- and she had to run.

Michael: - waves fondly -
Mira: bye....
Mira: signed off at 3:42:02 PM.

Then there was quiet, for a time.

That evening - home-office - near end of Citylighter-traces - took break, walked into Gabrielle's office - saw her sitting on desk, swinging legs, frustrated yet humorous - waiting on Darin to confirm a date for that evening.

Near-night, he rang - had a late-running call with his wife, now some last-minute theatre work to be do.

We went out - I in office-suit, she in her date-clothes - down Geary, past sushi places, waited at Park Presidio - headlights from approaches to Golden Gate - then crossed.

Empty storefronts - looked in as passed - then ahead the restaurants began.

Gabrielle noticed one, new-open, our sidewalk-side - elegant, dark facade - read name-sign, smiled, walked into long black-painted entry-hall of Blossom.

Waited for table - read long drink menu - I'd seen in movies, always wanted to try - feeling very grown-up, ordered Manhattan - Gabrielle, a Long Island Iced Tea. We sipped, talked easily.

Table ready - walked, drinks in hand, by dark walls into low-lit dining room.

I looked round, thought of all one couldn't see behind a restaurant-start - hoped they who'd put it together'd succeed. Bright-colored menus before us suggested culinary artistry.

Our eyes met - I leaned over, said, "This place is special." She said, quiet but all-present, "I agree."

We looked at the words and images - began to ponder what luscious fare we might have served to us from this incredible civilization that'd turned nutrition into art.

We looked at each other, low light colors-blending. Our hands joined.

The road was harsh, but sky'd gained new shade. We could look up, for a time be absorbed - and, looking down again, find our way in a new aspect.

Gabrielle and I walked into apartment, glow with us of here-and-now.

We embraced in hall, kissed, then to offices - she to work on next day's audition, I to begin on the written traces of Mira-and-me.

I read our first letters. I saw the unstoppable.

It wasn't that there was no glimmer elsewhere. Catherine and I talked, decided to meet Saturday - nature-walk on Peninsula, I'd give Mira's present, and we'd spend time in our own right.

But the central light was absent.

That night, as I drifted to sleep, I wondered about Rand's last words. I wondered, in feeling-thoughts, if she felt in her heart, at the end, that she'd lived well.

Then I went down to where all the lights came from.

7 March 2001.

This was a simple day.

At work, no incident.

I talked with Gwen, Gabrielle, other friends - each flowing.

In evening, Gabrielle returned exhilarated from audition - easy, comfortable, we sat on couch, talked how she'd done, then offices.

In time, I finished first-pass through letters.

Memory came of Mira's asking my consent. My agreement'd rested on her pure intentions.

I realized I didn't feel them anymore.

Yet much rested on them.

Her words of day-before felt strange.

I couldn't solve by myself - by reason, emotion, or will.

I'd have to tell her.

I lay for long, intensely charged, before sleep came.

8 March 2001.

My phone brought voices of brokers in western states for about an hour and a half.

Quiet'd come, I'd clicked "compose," was organizing thoughts - email came from her.

Several paragraphs long, tone friendly - clarity and verbal snap - told of her and Dave and Tara's doings in snowy Boston. Dimly-glimpsed, almost-unmentioned, was Jonathan.

No mention of what was happening between us. Since Monday I'd sent five or six love-notes - they said I missed her, was thinking of her. She had not answered.

Re-read her email. Objective in thrust, like physics lecture.

Began writing.

I asked her indulgence of a Michael-neurosis: I was worried about us, and wanted to ask for more substantial contact. I feared she'd see such a request as controlling. Yet without, I worried, we'd fragment, our relationship fall apart. I was, I wrote, asking for help: for her to tell me how I could best ask for better contact.

I read it over.

Too many layers.

Sudden memory of Zen aphorism: "A hair's breadth between heaven and earth, and the ten thousand things appear."

I read again, grimaced internally.

It was nude and true, and it didn't flow.

Awkward the situation - awkward would it go.

I hit "send."

I flowed out into afternoon.

I'd passed the barrier - nothing could stop me.

I thought of clarity as I drove, riding up toward first crest on Great Highway, long lines of clouds shining yellow from a sun already sunk to long horizon. At shore, waves burst onto sand, blue-white sky-light on billows.

As I watched them, past the grass-hills, I thought the waves looked lonely.

Gabrielle and I went for sushi at "26's."

Back home, voicemail - Mira's - "Hello, dearest! Oh, I *miss* you!" - overspilling, almost out-of-control.

Hope surged, almost orgasmic. It'd be okay.

She went on, rapid - wanted to talk - was very busy, very tired - have to wait 'til Saturday evening - would try call if she could get free - would I please email to confirm?

She ended "I love you!" as if running after a train.

I smiled to myself.

I felt her again.

I sent note, instantly, that I looked forward.

The sound of her voice rang in me, and I tasted it for as long as I could.

I lay in bed, suffused with hope - a little glow running through all.

It'd taken so little, really - just a touch.

I wanted us to regain the place where energy spilled forth.

It'd be different, perhaps more sedate, but I wanted us to join like streams finally able to make rivers.

9 March 2001.

I awoke in peace. I'd settled, during sleep, into long-wait.

I showered in serenity and drove, quietly, into Friday.

From work, told Gabrielle I'd miss her. Her day job - support to great Attorney in San Francisco - conference in Reno. Back Sunday afternoon.

At thought of weekend, excitement sprang: Saturday I'd meet Catherine, then Mira and I'd talk.

Around lunch-time, brief email from Mira - confirmed call.

I was cheered at return to contact.

Yet, as afternoon went, it began to sit less well. I didn't know why. Slowly, subtly - winter.

I reread, then day-before letter.

I felt severity rise. Was I holding tight to a bond certificate of a firm gone silently out of business?

I'd sent the call. It was to her to answer.

I felt a shift. I could not quite make it out. I looked out the window. The sun was lowering.

Inside me, something - not above, not below - on the horizon-level - was coming.

It passed across, then stopped.

My capacity for joy, hope was displaced by some neutral grey fog.

I looked, in and out, for the cause. It was nothing she'd done, or hadn't. Was too intense.

Work ended.

I walked out, lips tight, frowning.

I stepped from short concrete pad onto asphalt, eyes down - pulled keys, looked up at car.

I saw, beyond, through eucalypti at north lot-boundary, the blue of sky, yellow-white cloud-wisps in it, and the golden sun almost touching the western hills above the Peninsula.

Suddenly I felt partway released, lighter in my body.

I was between worlds in every way.

My-and-Mira's wasn't yet submerged. By my life, I couldn't find the bridge.

I thought of when it'd needed no finding.

As I started north, I vowed to walk through next twenty-four hours in equanimity.

I had to face her in self-possession.

For what we'd been, what I wanted us to be again, I had to give her every chance.

That evening I brought up archive of Jocelyn's old site.

I realized I carried a strange, secret love for this desperate attempt of a personality to declare itself into being. The person behind it had opened a world to me, and I wished that in another and better world I could thank her.

I allowed her entry, without reserve, knew again the glittering regard. I saw again what'd drawn me, and judged myself not aversely.

Some hours later, I turned away, dialed Gabrielle. She'd suite of her own, firm's courtesy, so we talked long and deep of Mira.

She counseled much patience as I could find in me. The situation was fluid - Mira clearly needed time.

I agreed, added I'd needs, too. Caring needed to be symmetric. "I'm sorry things are crappy," she said. "I wish I could be with you." I told Gabrielle was grateful for her - didn't care about crap so long as Mira-and-I came through okay.

After we'd hung, I could not look more at the past.

Blighted tiredness began crawling through me.

I went to bed and passed quickly to sleep.

10 March 2001.

I woke in a quiet world.

Sounds on Geary, my mood, my mind - all were subdued, as though letting out breath.

I showered in light of morning, dressed quickly.

I caught sight of pair of dark sunglasses on mantle inside my closet. I thought how much I'd given Jocelyn and Mira, freely.

I was slipping them on as I went out the door.

I'd imagined newspaper front of my face as she passed, then surprising her from behind - but as I'd pulled into the station the train'd been opening doors.

I'd never seen a photo. I looked for someone looking for someone.

People were walking off concrete onto asphalt. I sprinted through onto platform. It was almost empty save for a young woman walking toward me. In the instant I grasped a wide leonine face, I knew this was Catherine.

It was as if air opened to let us pass closer. We went right up to one another, she drifted to my left, I half-turned, somehow our hands found one another, I completed the turn, and we walked toward the car, hand in hand.

I pulled out Mira's print - handed it, bowing slightly, relayed birthday regards by voice. Catherine unrolled, looked, smiled to herself. She stowed it through open front window, onto rear seat - unusual focus, economy to her moving - then we got in and drove.

We turned round, south on El Camino Real, then up through the little tree-filled town where Beth and I'd had our first California apartment, finally down the reservoir road between the hills.

We slowed by an embankment - there across dark-green grass were the white pillars of the Water Temple against early green of the coastal range behind. But new grey mesh-fence was stretched across what'd once been open border over which one could easily step, then cross lawn-grass and walk by reflecting pool, cypress-lined.

I exclaimed at the mesh, drove forward a little further, on shoulder, to locked gate at parking lot entrance. A sign: access had been restricted due to changes within: new water-treatment plant being built, all'd changed - it said, at bottom, no telling when re-open. It was where I'd wanted us to walk.

"What to do?" said Catherine.

I turned to her. She was smiling impishly. I felt a kind of challenge - to find something as good or better. Thought of hard Randian drive to what-they-called-joy. This was different. It wasn't hard - it interacted. Looking into Catherine's eyes wasn't looking at blanked lenses - from deep in her, maybe hard to reach, she was aware of you, that you'd inside to you, too.

"Well," I said, after moment, "I haven't been able to take Mira to the Davenport cliffs yet. Mind being her stand-in?"

"Not at all," said Catherine, laughing. "Drive on!"

I turned round, began driving us toward the ocean road. Almost immediately cypresses and pillars disappeared behind dry trees as the reservoir road climbed up, then embankment was lost in swerving back-prospects of hills and trees in rear-view mirror. As we drove along the pine-lined blue of the lakes, Catherine and I spoke of coming again once the Temple re-opened.

The road rose, curved left, then right, passing through a notch between scrubgrass-covered hillocks. We turned left at traffic light at road's end and headed into west on the ocean road. We passed onto a spit of yellow-soil earth, narrow then wide then narrow, cutting across two lakes. I told Catherine we were directly over the Fault, that this road'd once gone straight across but the land underlying had become twisted.

As we left the spit and entered into forests on either side, I gestured backward, told Catherine it'd once been a fertile valley with town at floor. When valley was bought up and dammed in nineteenth century, waters from the streams rose and inundated the lately-abandoned hamlet - which Water Authority divers had recently found, in perfect preservation.

Catherine smiled. She didn't say much, but I sensed she was paying close attention, not just to me but to all that passed. I realized as we climbed watershed road, toward summit of the coastal range, that I was breathing deeply and easily. She was unlike any Rand-influenced I'd known, certainly different than I'd have expected a Citylighter.

We reached Skyline Boulevard's peel-off, crested the summit, began the long downhill turns to the flat gap-valley to ocean. As we entered the first turn, I looked across at her and said, "I'm glad you're here. I like you." She smiled, slightly aback, and my hand found hers for a bit as the car went down into the green valley on the single-switchback, down toward shore, the long blue spread we could see, miles away in the clear air, until we'd sunk into the shaded valley.

I let go, to steer round focus of the switchback ellipse. We were both smiling at one another, almost uncomfortable in the comfort.

Partway down the last straight-leg we passed concrete pad with metal pipe arched thigh-high, rooted in concrete at both ends. She looked as we passed.

"Used to be a spring," I said. "Open to the public. Beth and I'd drive by and there'd be cars parked and people lined up to fill bottles and big jugs. Then the County found the water was contaminated so they capped it off. People held protests - they didn't taste anything wrong, so they wouldn't believe it was bad."

We exchanged a few sentences about sensate orientations, and I felt rapid understanding between us that was anything but facile.

Then we were quiet, and drew closer to the ocean.

The Coast Highway ran for miles and miles south of Half Moon, close by cliffs, breakers on seaweed-strewn yellow beaches below. We were mostly

quiet with one another but strongly aware. I felt life returning to my body by being with this friendly, complex, intelligent person.

The road had dropped from cliff-tops, one of its biggest dips, almost to sea-level with brackish marsh to left, drifting sand dune to right, hidden breakers, when she suddenly turned to me, body angular, asked, half-smiling, "So how does it feel, being with me?"

I smiled in turn. I was usually the one to ask that. I looked inside me, at the pleasures I'd felt coming clearer, finely graded, each with an individual sweetness its own - this was new. I answered, spontaneous, as we passed onto the bridge over the creek, "It feels like there are multi-colored lights in my belly."

She smiled once again. "Good."

We entered the long run past Pescadero, minutes passed quickly and the road went on cliff-tops again until I saw the tall stacks, improbable, of the Davenport cement plant over the piney hills - the first sign we were near.

We passed the last vegetable fields that went off from the road over to cliff-face, slowed as we came to railroad across the highway - single-track, little-used, no lights or gates - then crossed tracks and pulled into the rocky parking lot across from the plant.

We got out into a cool, dusty wind. The sky was almost white, noon-sun, and we marched down the embankment and over the rusty-track railroad onto the path by cliffs.

I pointed to a line of pier-bases running into the surf - they'd borne effluent-pipe from the cement plant to discharge offshore, before pollution was understood. The pipe was long-gone. Only they remained, four barnacled rust-dripped concrete giants - nothing after, abrupt end, mission ended.

Our eyes met. "This was one of my and Beth's big places," I said. We turned left to walk on the path. "We used to stand right here and look at them." I felt the lost world of my marriage. We walked away, between the Ice Plant beds. "She used to call it 'The Bridge to Nowhere.'" She looked at me, mutedly sympathetic. As we climbed a rise, I remembered the attraction Rand held for introverts.

We entered my favorite place - a long flat cliff-top choked with coast pines, canopy dark, almost opaque, trunks and branches gnarled, bent

away from the edge by decades of steady winds in from sea, bark strange grey-lightened by salt air - small tree-labyrinth, with sea waves steadily breaking far below, a trail winding through it, through greening grass along the edge.

I looked forward at the trail, an informal trail kept by no authority but the feet of those who wished to walk to trail's end. As we began to go down, it was as if all my troubles of late were clearing off as wind blew and sunlight fell. Here in nature with a new friend by my side, I was returned to my own.

We walked along, and I stopped her at a place to show one of my favorite trees. A metal tag, light grey, was nailed to the trunk, and engraved words stood in memory of a wedding ceremony of years before. And then we walked on again, to the place where trees cleared on left to a vine-covered slope into great gap between two chalkish cliffs. We stood on the rocky point, looked south at the opposite cliff-face, then at the sea crashing against the cliff-root across the gap. The water heaved up offshore, then rose up and crashed forward on the dark rock-table pushing out from the gap-floor, sending spray-plumes and great booms as the masses of water came down on rock and then ran off in foamy streams back into the sea.

We stood for a time, then I felt hungry. I pointed inland, up the gap, - it went to a back-angling brambley hill steep to the railroad, almost level with cliff-tops. I indicated the town-buildings across highway. "Are you hungry? I'm getting there, and I'd like to show you the Cash Store." Catherine assented, a little vague, and we hiked back a bit then turned right, walked through pines on through-trail to the railroad. We crossed tracks, then walked at the back of the old Odwalla plant to - at corner-angle of property-fence - a small chalky outcrop: a little natural stair. We climbed up, crossed grassy field - tender green under whiteish sky - crossed highway, then down into the Store.

"Another place," I said, looking at the high-ceiling dining room. "Found it same day we found the cliffs - second honeymoon, in '89."

Soon we were seated beneath native spirit-masks and dancing Day-of-the-Dead skeletons, reading menus. I saw shifts since first meal here - more *nouvelle*, prices to match, but still a corn-meal Santa-Fe-like good-

ness to be found.

As we ordered, I felt descent from the heightened feelings of outside. Back in the human world I sensed the troubled structures of emotion all around me. I looked at her looking up at the masks and skeletons, taking in their natures quietly, and knew that, though Mira's friend, she could be trusted.

I rubbed my face for moment, then looked in her eyes. "I need to ask your advice," I said, "or rather your read on something. It's about Mira and me."

She nodded, eyes looking into me.

"Have you talked to her recently?" I asked.

She said Mira'd been busy in Boston with friends - their schedules hadn't matched.

I exhaled, then began to lay out my history with Mira. I summarized, clean, objective as I could - the feeling of laying evidence for a court. I looked at Catherine as I spoke and saw no partiality.

When I was finished, I leaned back, blinked a few times - eyes were dry. I breathed more deeply.

Catherine considered for a while and said, complex thoughts, "Yeah. She's distancing herself from you."

She paused, then looked at me, spoke.

"I'm sorry."

I exhaled again, feeling both a bit crumpled and a bit freed.

"That's," I said, "pretty much what I figured. Things have been too off, and they've pointed in one direction."

"I ... don't think it's necessarily all over yet," she said. "It's curious. There's a lot that goes into these things, and sometimes it seems like it's past the point of no return, but you're really not."

"The thing is - I'm not sure how long I can keep it up when there's this - degeneration, before my eyes. Lemme tell you, if she'd written me that kind of letter, I'd be on the phone instantly."

"Well, you have to talk to her."

"She told me she was too busy until tonight."

I knew irk was coming into my voice, as more of me processed Catherine's judgment.

"Look," she said, bit peremptory, "what do you want with her?"

"I want ... things to be good. I'd *like* them to be as good as when it all started, but I don't know if that can be. I have a really awful feeling that I'm being screwed over, and I don't know why. I feel like I was completely generous to her, she promised to keep me in the loop about everything, and I really don't know why it's all gone so badly. I encouraged her to go after Jonathan, I had no problem with it - why am I the one being cut out?"

As our meal came, we spoke of the various pressures Mira was under from friends and from family. I didn't like it, but had to admit I hadn't fully considered all the factors.

"She's a very social girl, Michael," Catherine was saying. "This stuff *matters* to her. It's partly her personality, partly her age."

I remembered Mira's evocations of loneliness in Boston - wondered how much of her full self I'd gotten. I thought back to shifts in Colorado - perhaps we'd been able to be amazing in empyrean heights when just us, soul-to-soul, but in the world of men, like coming down into the Store, there'd been complications.

I thought of delicate dynamics, the care I'd taken - looking out for a moment at sunlight, now at after-noon strength, thought of no-return zones near black holes.

"What are you thinking?" said Catherine, soft-voiced. Another I usually asked.

"Of the Schwarzschild radius, actually."

We talked animatedly of thermodynamics - she'd never heard of Sidis. She looked at me with glowing happiness and said, "That's why we can be friends - we want to understand it all!"

We'd finished, were waiting for bill, when I suggested a return to the cliffs. She agreed.

I handed card - same one in Maine. We left the Store, and I told her I knew another way.

We walked downhill by the highway, crossed to right, followed rocky

path just south of Odwalla fences through brush and low-hung branches onto the tracks. We walked up-track a bit, then entered the through-trail.

We reached the point, and there the waves were, wind blowing up and over cliff-edge with little bits of grit in the first fresh air touching land, and I said, "We can go down a bit. Beth and I used to climb all the way down, walk up the gap, then uphill to the tracks."

She looked, a bit dubious, down at the crumbly pale rock along the narrow deteriorated cliff-edge, then nodded. We clambered over stair-like rock, as by Odwalla, and stopped at a ledge halfway down from the cliff-tops.

She sat down on the ledge-flat, looking up where we'd come from, then at me. I turned and continued down, steeper, the steps longer and more displaced back-and-forth, until I jumped down onto the gap-floor, almost sea-level. I walked out, to almost under the spray, to look down at what'd always haunted me.

It was a square hole, a few feet in from the final drop-off, broken by long-ago picks into the solid rock. Then the men of the nineteenth century had poured in concrete and set a massive iron ring wherethrough to run lines from their ships coming in from sea - whether small dinghies or the great ships themselves, I knew not. Thus secured, they had brought to land their reapings from the bodies of whales.

The ring was still there, massive, rust-frozen to the iron post coming up from the block, and within the space of the broken hole, clustered in the pool of water ever-freshed by waves, were sea anemones with stretched tendrils, translucent light blue-green in the dark stoned water.

I looked back, up, saw her on the rock, sitting in air. I headed across the table, water-crashes behind me. Soon I reached the beginning of the climb. I saw her grinning face peep out over the stone ledge - wind blowing her hair out, shining in sun around her, looking down at me, smiling, squinting shut against the light, sky behind.

I looked down, concentrate on footing. When I'd reached brief respite at the ledge below hers, a little pebble tapped me on the shoulder. Wind must've blown it, I thought. Then another one. I looked upward - she, delicately tossing some into air, then aiming more aggressive, her

smile impish again.

"Cut that out, brat!" I said, and began to clamber up.

I reached the ledge-flat, and instead of being met by a smiling face or a pebble, I saw her settled on her haunches, hands around knees, looking out to sea.

The texture of things shifted. It was like going through a door into something softer, meaningful. I knew she was not only looking out over the water, but away from me.

She did not look up.

It was in that moment I knew we'd emotionally connected.

I drew beside her.

I said, "Something's different."

She nodded, without speaking.

I stood for a time, then said, "Let's go back up."

We climbed back to the top. We stopped, turned at the point, looked down the ledge, then over at the waves. We began up-trail, then stopped again, unaccountable. She dropped down into a swath of green on a slope at the edge and spread herself out. I dropped to my knees beside her then lay down, back of my head brushed by the tall blades just at the cliff-lip, last plants for the entire continent-line, I thought, looking through the trees.

We talked easily in the sun nestled close in the green, then without word we hugged, and I melted. It was right and nourishing, to hug this girl-stranger, Citylighter, friend-of-Mira but different to her by worlds.

I felt as if untouched for a long time, and I drank it and the full-sun warmth from above.

We looked into each other's eyes. I wanted her in my life forever.

"Let's go walk in the fields," she said, a bit abrupt.

"Alright," I said, up for anything now, wondering if she wanted us to be a little less close now, less intimate. We got up, brushed off.

We walked back, past the wedding of years-ago, past the pier-bases, down a slight dip, up abruptly into a farmer's fields, different colors -

brown of rich soil and green thistles of artichokes growing in the sun. All the colors seemed to burn brighter, deeper as we walked into the fields, ground underfoot muddy from plant-water, puddles in tractor-wheel tracks were the only way to walk between the cliff-face and the plants. I looked down at the brown mud my shoes were sinking into, clear water around, and I felt in contact with life. Forevermore I'd see the mud and clear water and my shoes going in as I made my way.

We began to speak of our histories as we walked along the fields, and it was as though we were passing deeper into a gathering energy, something strange and archetypal without visible source. Everything was becoming increasingly meaningful and charged.

The field ended, and there was a down-slope and a sandy hill, beachy, with different paths round it. We parted. She appeared above, faster on the level route. I got up the side and caught up, a new field beginning at our feet.

We walked on and on, field after field, and it was strange and sublime in the sun. We reached a gully - looked over at opposite side, saw cross-way fences that'd stop our easy-walking - we turned right, toward the highway. She asked what'd happened to Beth.

I felt I was entering a strange land.

We were close to the highway.

I answered. Beth had turned careful, worrisome. She came to oppose the uncontrolled - so became nearly a recluse, before the recur.

We were at corner-angle of field and highway. We drifted to a halt. She stood facing me, the northern fields behind her, the sun on her face. The strange meaningfulness rose, almost unbearable. "That's what did her in," I said, out of myself.

A frown crossed her face. I looked in her eyes and thought of a storm rising within. She opened lips and cried out, almost angry, "I'm so tired of careful!"

Her words and the force behind them shot into me. I knew immediately that this was a gift. It was exactly what I'd needed. Nothing else could have been so right.

She was still talking, of having been careful for so long, how it'd checked her, how she was ready now to throw all off. I took it in silence. We began

walking down the highway, silent, thrown into non-rationality. It wasn't sexual, but unexpected tight, bound together. I remembered the look in her eyes, wondered if she'd known I'd needed it.

I looked at the gnarled pines, diagonal across the artichokes, turn-angle tightening as we walked. The energy eased. We passed a boarded-up shack, perhaps for seasonal pickers.

Then, nearing the rail-crossing, we came to a property lot thick-bordered by coast pines, blue-green needle-leaf shrubs, barbed-wire fencing, tall silver-painted metal gate, spiked and padlocked between two concrete uprights. To left of left upright was a little fence-gap, and she slipped through. I followed, onto small gravel parking lot before upright concrete building, with tall windows - 1930s? - directly across from cement plant, sea side. She'd darted forward, weightless, around the corner. Hidden from me.

I went round, to building's southern side, saw her vanishing up front steps. I followed. She was peering into doors' grill-protected glass. She stepped aside as I reached top step, behind her. She gestured merrily at inside. She skipped down, and I looked through.

A narrow hallway ran from the doors, into the building. Office doors either side. Pale-colored walls, ceramic-tile floor, no furnishings, electric plugs and doors of no discernible period, a look of decades' desertion - yet spotless-clean, as if hermetic-sealed - yet, attached to walls and ceiling, decorated streamers and brightly colored banners for a party, seeming of the present day.

I looked above me, up at the entry-arch - saw I'd walked, unseeing, beneath a rainbow banner, wordless, attached to arch-sides by tape and tacks.

She was standing on lot, watching me silently. I descended backward, facing door. I saw papers and soils and plant waste blown up onto step-verticals and compressed by wind and rain.

I reached gravel. I stared at facade, almost frozen. She walked off. I followed. We were out by the highway. The plant steamed and hooted in its pines. The surf shished behind the building we'd left - cliffs at back, across artichokes.

We walked down the right-of-way, then through-trail. She needed

to be home by 5pm - we were far from South Bay. I didn't want this to end, but it had to.

We stood at the point. We looked on the great spaces - from the opposite cliff, to waves crashing on its root, to the open sea where whales now could pass in safety.

We walked away. We turned off into the forest.

A few steps in, she abruptly hugged me. I fell back against a trunk. I knew now what I needed with Mira and Gabrielle.

We passed through thorned berry-bushes, onto the tracks. We turned, walked variously beside and atop the steel, until close to the crossing by the stacks.

As I was unlocking, we looked toward horizon, then at each other. I raised my hand, beyond the forest, to promontory point, and extended a finger.

"I want my ashes scattered there," I said.

We pulled doors shut. Sounds of wind and cement dimmed. I cranked engine, pulled floor-shifter to "drive," gave gas. Almost instantly, the car began to spin out. Rocks pinged in the wheel wells, dust began to rise. Powered down, and we moved out of cloud. We bounced up on asphalt, tires bit in, and we sped south.

The railroad settled on our right, gap appeared briefly, point flashed by, and we began to descend, past the Store. We swung up, a brief gap to right - glimpse of white surf dashing against free-standing pillar of light-colored rock, green moss and grass atop - then farms swelled out and pushed the edge away.

We shot, accelerating, between vegetable fields, road level under sunny sky. We were silent.

We leaned into broad arcs, road widening as we closed to Santa Cruz - first traffic lights, slowing - quick as town-traffic allowed - fast running into Route 17 over the mountains.

We flew up straights, rounded tight curves, and before much time at all were pulling in front of Catherine's house.

The entire day was in our look. We reached in a quick strong hug, then parted. I saw the imp enter, and she leaned forward and kissed me on the lips, quickly and sweetly.

"To seal the deal!" she said, sparkling.

Then she was out, that same rich bodily economy, and into the house. I pulled out, and soon was on the highway up the Peninsula.

The road skirted the west lip of Silicon Valley, through parklands, over the long grey shank of Stanford's Linear Accelerator, laid for two miles across the green, one of my loved landmarks - as California to me as crackling-hot pine smell of Goosie's old garden - then the reservoir, then the great bridge over the valley in which the dam was set, then the long run parallel to the coastal range - watershed.

A thick almost-solid white fog, a mile in breadth, was slowly crawling over crest, through trees, holding to earth. I remembered what old residents called it, and watched the Bridal Veil thin as it dropped.

Passing the border into San Francisco, I wasn't quite ready to go to the apartment yet. I wanted to be alone with the world.

I passed up through Golden Gate Park, and turned left, down Park Presidio to the approaches, before long crossed over dark-grey water with sunset-colored wavecaps. I hit land, drove up switchbacks, through tunnel opening out to Marin County - glass-and-wood houses, hot-tubs, small elegant eateries scattered through green hills. Down the grade, then off just before a bridge, and the road became northern continuer of the Coast Highway. Bulk of Mount Tamalpais hovered among clouds to right. The road twisted up, and I knew where I had to go - not to think but simply to be. I passed the turnoff to the summit, went down past the sill-like eucalypti-shade driveway of the Zen monastery with its narrow car-road to buildings below and, further down-valley, organic vegetable fields. The main road bottomed out in setting-sun haze, then climbed up and turned round. It crested a spine of hills, past the last houses for a time. I drove for a while, then stopped, got out, leaned against the hood and looked out upon the quiet earth.

Before me was the vast expanse of the Pacific, with only a small cloud-fringe rounding the horizon and slowly taking on golden-fire color of the sun. The wind blew softly, stirred by evening cooling, and smelled

of pines below and salt of the invisible breaking waves beyond. To right was the perfect quarter-shell of Stinson curving in to accept and embrace the incoming waves of the sea. I turned round, and there, away from sea, was Tamalpais.

I remembered story of the Dalai Lama at a sunrise ceremony on its peak in '89. Someone'd said, without irony, "Pretty impressive mountain, eh?" The Tibetan exile had turned to the speaker, eyebrows up, and smiled.

I remembered Kendrick's writing of excursions up to its summit on the remarkable cog railway that'd run through the redwoods in the 1910s.

I looked off from the peak, knowing somewhere in the trees was the little colony that Elsa Gidlow'd established, Druid Heights she'd called it. There the man who'd opened Eastern thought to me, Alan Watts, had lived, and lusted helplessly for the strong-willed Sapphic poet. I'd read him the sleepless night before I married Beth in 1988 - and, ten-and-a-half-years later, in the hospital room on the last night of her life.

One of his titles, spontaneous: *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. Ingrid and I'd lit upon each other when we'd first met, finding each'd been influenced.

I looked out over the sea, then above. Stars were starting to shine where the blue was deeper. It was getting late, and I had things to do. I took a breath of the pure clear air, then I got into my car, and drove back along the road whence I'd come.

Passing the organic farm, I looked uphill at the silver staffs of eucalypti, leaves like thin drooping sheaves of olive-branches, waving in the east-running breeze - the memory came.

One day, about a decade before, Beth and I'd walked in surf at Stinson, then by the wide marshy lagoon, a bit inland. On the way back, curious at monastery-sign, I'd pulled into driveway. The valley below was flaring green in mid-afternoon sun and I was almost overwhelmed. A thin grey-haired man was up checking the mailbox, and I rolled down window and gabbled, "This looks like such a beautiful place!"

He half-turned to me with a penetrating look, said without a moment's pause, "It looks beautiful because it is beautiful."

His words went in with a shock.

I realized that - whether he was the electrician, the Zen master, or both - it was a lesson. I'd been looking upon it as if a muzzy dream, far away from me, and he'd brought the valley itself, had smashed my dreaming and given me the actual.

Quickly I'd said "I understand!" then rolled up window and driven away as if stung. Beth hadn't liked it, but he'd spoken just as he and I had needed - and by his words a life-change was begun.

I'd never seen him again, never knew his name, but I considered him my teacher.

I passed the driveway, reached the monastery's upper meadow, where Watts'd wanted his ashes scattered, and crested. As I swept through the downhill turns, I thought of Mira. Over the past week she'd been chaotic, volatile, silent, loving. Tonight could go anywhere. I had to be ready with whole self - no concept or plan in the way.

Before long the Mountain was at my back.

I passed into the tunnel, down the great curves - towers and span, my city before me, lights coming on as the sky sank into night.

I walked through door to the apartment and flipped on lights. It was after 10pm in Boston. I checked voicemail - nothing, and computer showed no contact.

I walked to Sky Chef.

I sat in back, away from windows. Sitting by cash register I ordered pad thai gai - then walked through our history.

I wanted to give no off-putting reactions - so she could say all she needed.

Then I'd answer, and see where we stood.

It was our time.

I walked back, stomach knotted.

I sat at my desk, checked voicemail. Still no message, nearly 11pm in Boston. I paced the hardwood a few times, then thought to turn on ICQ and AIM.

There was Gwen. We hailed one another.

She pantomimed reaching out to hold my hand, asked how I fared. Pretty well, I said - on the flat side no Mira-call, but it seemed Mira's trying was less successful lately. I pantomimed a wink-eye.

The phone rang.

I told Gwen it was Mira and I'd be right back. I looked down at the phone.

It rang again. I inhaled, tried to relax my stomach and heart-rate, and picked up.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hello, Michael. It's me." Her voice was cool and level.

I focused on staying calm.

"Mira! I'm glad to hear from you, at last."

My beloved said, brusquely, "Well, this is going to be an extremely short phone call. I am very, very tired, and Jon and a few of my friends are sitting in my living room."

The things of my office turned paler and faded. I asked what she'd been doing.

She rapidly stated a series of events to do with her, Dave, and Tara. Jonathan was not mentioned. At a pause I said I'd met Catherine and it'd gone well. She indicated gladness, then resumed. I waited until she ran out of things.

"Mira, where have you been this past week? I know you've had Dave, Tara, and Jonathan in your life, but it's felt like you've actively avoided being in contact with me."

Small, almost scared. "I was afraid of getting involved with you."

I got out, "Afraid - of getting involved with me ... why?"

A sigh. "On Wednesday, I told my mother something about you and Gabrielle and she threatened to cut me off emotionally and financially if I kept seeing you. The financial I could accept, but the emotional - Michael, I can't let that happen!" She paused, then cried out, "Michael, I'm sorry!"

"I know," I said, low and quiet.

She said nothing.

I said, "Why didn't we talk about this as, soon as it happened?"

Pause, then partway brusque. "I felt really disconnected from you. I needed time to myself." Tone eased, pace increased. "I needed time to think. I've been whirled away. I'm in a muddle and a whirl." Impatience. "There's been Dave, Tara, Jon - mundanity." Last word as if shoulder-shrugging.

"What kept you from closing your door and calling me?"

Harder. "Part of me wanted to break away from what I was doing this week, and part of me did not." Last word emphatic, almost pugnacious. Took a breath. Casual, almost confiding. "I guess I've been in a selfish mode."

"This was not a time for us to be out of touch, during the Jonathan-experience."

Explosive hostility. "So why didn't you call me earlier in the week?"

(I didn't catch the falsehood.)

"What," I said, "has that to do with anything? What prevented you from calling me? I was not going to clutter up your machine with messages begging for your precious time. I wanted you to meet me half-way."

Chill, formal voice. "I retract the comment."

I took a breath. "Being out of touch with you at such a critical time has been hard."

Anger, blame, near-contempt, "Well, if it was hurting you so badly, why weren't you more forceful about getting me in touch with you?"

I said with some anger. "I thought you'd remember how I'd given Gabrielle and Darin time to themselves when they were falling in love and I was with you in Boston. You and Jonathan needed time, and I gave it - freely!"

She said nothing.

"Besides, what about the five or six emails?"

She said nothing.

I felt her guilt.

I thought of the only thing it could be.

"Mira, how far did things go with Jonathan?"

Bright. Soft. Dreamy quality. "Jonathan and I made love last night,

and it was *exquisite*."

The world became an unbroken snow-field.

I stood erect and alone in a great white-lit expanse of space and time. I had a gracious eternity for all I needed.

I saw it all.

Strength flooded me.

"It is clear to me that Jonathan is your primary connection now -"

She said nothing.

"- that you and I have no relationship left -"

She said nothing.

"- and, you know, we had an agreement that you'd be open with me. And it really is too bad, that *I* am the one saying this to *you*."

In a quiet voice, she replied. "That's true."

I felt digust at her.

I asked, "So what about the future - ?"

She said, "I don't know"

"I have come to a decision. I am not coming to Boston."

She answered, glacial. "Fair enough."

"Send back the property I left. I will email my address. Goodbye, Mira."

I paused.

She said nothing.

I hung up, immediately, sharply.

I sat in my chair carefully, as if I were of glass.

I looked at the phone.

"If you love me," I thought, "you will call back. You'll call back and we will start afresh."

I could not feel my body.

No heartbeat. No breath.

Nothing but buzzing.

Motion was returning.

I wondered if I'd been an idiot.

I began to pick up the phone, tempted.

My soul said no.

There could be nothing after this.

I began to shake, to know all that would never be.

Fury rose in me.

I emailed my postal address, nothing else. I hoped it smashed her in the face.

I saw the directory in which I'd carefully stowed every one of our beautiful letters.

In a convulsion of grief and horror I deleted them forever.

I began to cry.

I laid my head down and wept.

"God damn you, Mira," I whispered, "God damn you."

Waves of rage.

I began to smash my fist on the desk thunderous.

I sobbed and growled wildly.

I didn't give a damn about neighbors.

I wept, smashing until pain penetrated.

I sat up, rubbing my hand.

I realized dear Gwen was waiting.

I sat for a time, breathed, subsided.

I wiped eyes and nose on sleeve.

I brought fingers to the keyboard.

Michael: that's it ... it's over between mira and myself

Gwen exclaimed in confusion and sympathy.

I began to weep, to rage and curse and smash.

I didn't care what it did to me.

Then I just cried.

In time I could breathe and think again.

An indomitable impulse rose.

To document all that'd just happened.

I drew myself up, summoned severe-faced logic, and began to tell Gwen what had happened.

Mira's words whirled like pecking birds. I grabbed the closest. Anger darted up into the logic.

I cursed her foully, obscenely.

I began to type, much as I could, exact quotes.

I'd finished, we were expressing disbelief and outrage.

The phone rang.

I whipped my head. Could it?

I hoped I'd have to apologize, profusely, for years.

I picked up.

It was Gabrielle, wanting to know how it'd gone.

I told Gwen I'd return, took phone, lay on my side in bed, and told her.

Gabrielle had to go to end-of-conference, so, somewhat disoriented, put on my coat and walked downhill, round the winding streets, fog-mist coating.

I found a parapet overlooking the rocky entry to the Bay, and stopped, facing all that was before me. Dark ships passed in and out, waves lapped against sand and rock below, tiny ever-moving light-smears that were cars on the Bridge came out and crossed then passed into night - fog-shapes moved in from ocean through the miles of air between this overlook and the long, high, straight headlands across the waters.

I stood in vast quiet sadness.

Tears came. I looked at the water and fog and ships and cars, and the words came to my mind, words said to be Buddha's last, the summing-up of his entire life. They came, and they stayed.

> *All composite things pass away.*
> *Still, we must do our best.*

The tears slipped down, and mixed with mist on cheek, coat.

Something pressed at what remained of shock. I felt into this newness, and knew it - and surrendered.

I stood there, and turned myself over to the rise and fall and rise-again

of memory in me. Facing the vast dark space, the history of Mira-and-me begin to knit again.

When the threads were at rest, I walked away, hands in coat - the one, I thought quietly, I'd worn in Boston.

I walked into my room, checked the computer, found that Gwen'd gone to bed.

In time, I called Gabrielle in Reno, said goodnight, turned off lights, and fell in a sleep void of dreams.

11 March 2001.

I awoke shortly after dawn, and felt it, without thought, as if the morning light bore it.

I breathed, looked in myself. I felt freer, if emptier. Anger of the night before, worry of the week preceding - all gone. But the price ... it came as memory pushed, beyond the chocolate party, back to a time of integrity when everything'd seemed magically right.

I curled in the sleigh-bed and cried softly. My chest tightened against it, so I breathed until the sobbing returned, and I relaxed into that, too. I closed my eyes, let tears wash down, and remembered what Reich had called crying: "Nature's softener."

After twenty minutes or so I got up and showered gently, padded into kitchen and made breakfast. The taste of food in a quiet morning was peaceful, and I felt curiously almost-well with the world, even with Mira. Perhaps we'd talk again, and come to some sort of understanding.

I walked into my room, turned on the computer. ICQ notes came from Gwen, asking how I was. I pantomimed a loving hug.

Michael: i'm doing quite well! feeling for the most part like icky clouds and ambiguous miasmas have lifted in the Case of Mira

We talked in depth of its dynamics, of the betrayal of the possible - the need to be aware simultaneously of past, present, and future - the decline of parenting in a nervous-busy age - each another stanza in our friend-

ship's endless intrigue in human interplays with the world.

As we talked, I scanned the journals of the Citylighters.

There was nothing new on Mira's. I wondered if she'd write about what'd happened, and how she'd tell it. I twinged slightly, reading the motto from *Lady Chatterley*.

Catherine's most recent was Thursday's. She'd posted anecdote from me. In the 1940s Reich'd looked sharply at a patient and said, "You have a mask!" The patient had said, "So have you, Dr Reich." Reich'd smiled and said, "Yes. But the mask doesn't have *me*."

It was nearly 9am. I called Gwen - we talked more, long-deep - then I climbed in my car and drove over the Bridge in the clear blue-sky air. At its end I entered onto the winding headlands road. I rose into the western hills until I was looking down on the tops of the red-orange towers, beyond them the clean city risen. I parked at the crest, by the old coast defense tunnel, turned to the spring brush and green shoots on the hillsides, and hiked for hours under the pines, breathing into me the air up from the sea.

Here, without companion or trail, once again was I returned to my own.

I picked Gabrielle up at the airport. We hugged tightly and drove back to the apartment.

In that evening and night, she was at her tenderest and strongest. We'd entered almost a new relation. Not what we'd been before, but broken to simpler, less chaos-flying, more of present.

We went for late-night sushi at one of the brightly-lit places down Geary. As we sat before the little plates, we spoke of odd lack of contact from Darin. There'd been, she said, a drop in energy from him since the dinner together.

He too, it seemed, was fading. We shook our heads at the strange ways of the heart-mind.

In time we went back, straight to sleep in the sleigh-bed, wound more closely in each other's arms than we'd ever been.

12 March 2001.

Walking into work, I stopped in the doorway.

In four days I'd be gone, into the unplanned. I'd quit to be nearer to Mira, so all might follow the strange fortune.

A center was gone, but my thrust to liberty, to walk into the less-known, remained.

I walked in, cubicles on either side.

Through morning, nothing new on journals. I mused on the smash-up, found spare moments with Gabrielle. I pantomimed a slightly sad shake of head.

Michael: it did not have to be this way
Michael: if it needed to end, it did not need to end this way

I said I felt smushed and soft, right then. Not sad or upset, though it could go so.

I looked over things still on my desk - in Rolodex, card with addresses in Boston and Colorado. I tore it up, dropped shards into recycle - told Gabrielle it felt a little funereal, a little celebratory.

I turned to other-things of work, and in this day's talks with Gwen and Gabrielle was supported and brightened. Truly a circle of outstanding heart-friends, and all moving into newness. Gabrielle'd a growing dedication to opera as career. Gwen worked to find a work faster, truer-to-her, than she'd dared. Catherine and I talked this day, too - began working out the curious closeness that'd come on a railroad platform, on a highway by the sea, on grass on a sea-side cliff, on an endless walk among growing things.

I took a noon meeting, then lunch. On return, immediately checked journals again. Something was pulling - I knew not what. Wasn't only what Mira might write. I'd a formless, finger-drumming sense of anticipation.

I turned back to my desk. Phone calls came in, faxes crossed my desk, I went to Harry's office and talked about the law case as though nev-

er leaving.

Walking back, I looked at the desks of Customer Service, then the closed-door office of the underwriters. I'd done this - most employees hired so recently, knew not how it'd begun: me, my hand-compiled list of several dozen local mortgage brokers, and a challenge from Randy to make it work.

I'd done it, expanded the firm into Washington, Oregon, Colorado. The loans had poured in.

I walked past my desk, strolled through the departments.

I ended up in back - thousands of files in long rows of metal cabinets.

I tugged a few drawers, looked, spread, read through remains.

Some'd gone away. A few'd been frauds. Most'd made it.

At about 4:12pm, I returned, sat down at my desk.

Once more, I thought. I checked her journal.

A new entry was up: "Lost and Found."

I knew that she'd written about us.

I closed my eyes, then opened.

I began to read.

"It is a Monday morning."

I'd sense of her clearing a quiet space in which to do her work.

With that strongly-lit clarity, she pictured Dennis showering in the bathroom, a Dar Williams CD playing in the living room, a week's snowfall shining outside, a feeling of being grounded in the present, in full stomach and crick'd neck and bed on which she was sitting, writing.

She sketched her days with Dave and Tara. They'd run about Boston seeing shows, exploring corners, following whims - cooked together, spent two full days snowed-in, stayed up talking and gotten not enough sleep, told deep secret things of kinds only people truly familiar could be unafraid to tell.

The familiarity'd been perfect for the past week of strange emotional upheavals.

She'd gone back to ballet feeling out of shape, but that was coming back

too, and there were challenges and rewards ahead in that.

That, she wrote, was her update on mundanity.

Word-choice impeccable, I thought, placement flawless. Perfect balance - no muddle. She was in good form.

I could see by lower periph there was about half the entry left to read. She'd announced our beginning, and I knew that, in what remained, she'd speak of our end.

In the non-mundane, too, she wrote, much'd happened. She'd had a crush on a guy at work named Jonathan, and the crush'd turned out to be mutual and was quickly blossoming into a glorious love affair. There'd be more on this, she stated, as warranted.

And Michael has, mysteriously and suddenly, disappeared out of my life. We had a few days of no communication, because I was busy here with Dave and Tara and Jon, and then a brief phone call and a good-bye that I never would have seen coming in a million years. I was completely shocked by this, still am, really, and yes, I hurt. I hurt more than a little bit, but I'm not entirely heartbroken. I have moments of bewilderment and confusion, pain and a huge sense of loss. But frankly, I have more important things to hand.

She'd a life in Boston, a beautiful group of friends in one of the most marvelous towns on earth to play in. She'd love and support from home, a career to think of, so much to learn and see and do.

When she'd moved to Boston she'd used the 'net as a crutch to help with her loneliness. She'd spent hours exploring personal websites, reading old logs, talking to people on ICQ and AIM. But she didn't need that anymore.

It'd be foolish to exchange her real life there in Boston for blinking lights on a screen.

So she'd be online occasionally to say hello to old friends, catch up on events, to talk to people as she felt the need.

But for the most part, I'm going to say goodbye to the Internet community that I've been a part of.
Life here is simply more important.

-Mira

A spasm of disbelief in my stomach.

{ *she's pulled an ayn rand* }

I read it again.

I hadn't hallucinated. She'd done it.

Worse than the phone call, I said to myself.

I read it once again.

I spoke in my mind, almost inarticulate. I cursed her obscenely, vowed she'd not escape, welcomed her smashing it, completely, for it would all come back.

I hardly knew what I said.

I closed the computer window.

Few minutes later, a Citylighter wrote me - Barbara - young collegian whose most recent journal'd suggested more than friendly interest in me.

I asked if she'd heard any rumbles.

Oh, she answered, from Mira herself, earlier in day.

"She wished me good luck - and said she hoped you wouldn't do to me what you'd done to her."

I spoke in my mind.

"So. That's how you want it? So be it. *Enemies*."

Gabrielle and Gwen were online.

I wanted to see what they'd see.

I only showed them where to look.

They saw and felt it as I had.

Gabrielle told me how sorry she was it'd turned out this way.

She had to leave work shortly, and said goodbye.

I opened the window with Gwen

She looked upon the same field, saw the same.

They complemented, perfectly.

I waved a dismissive mental hand at Mira.

I'd answer her, sometime, short and sweet, and leave it behind.

In the meantime, there was life.

Gwen's window blinked. I opened.

She asked, gingerly, if I could take a good surprise.

Please, I said - something new.

I could feel her take a breath.

She had been offered a job as an apprentice engineer at a great hydroelectric project in the wilds of her province.

She'd accepted - and, she added, smiling, didn't intend to stay apprentice for long.

My eyes grew wet.

What she should've been from the start.

Clerk no more.

That evening, at home, I looked at Mira's journal again.

I noted, in elegiac sense, that for all the balanced symmetry of its title, she'd called the page, simply, "lost.html."

I could not believe it.

Why?

I couldn't stop myself from looking once more through the records of our beginning. I wondered what I could write, now. To what point? An end in ruins? And form it out of what?

Yet still, I looked.

About an hour later, the phone rang. I looked at it, then realized I was hoping foolishly.

It was Goosie.

"Mickey Mouse," she said, "it's time for you to come down. You and I've been on this road before, and we have to start talking about a hospice for your mother."

I closed eyes. Goosie summarized: tests showing more negative signs, my mother still comfortable but beginning, gently, to fail as the tumors grew and spread.

"Okay. I'll be there soon."

"Don't take the Coast - for Goosie? Take 101, then 156. Those damned cliffs are dangerous. More Porsches at the bottom of the Pacific there than shipwrecks."

"Don't worry, Goose. I've driven it a lot. I won't get into trouble."

Her voice turned exasperated - and warm.

"Mickey Mouse, you make Goosie lie awake at night! But I love you to pieces. No changing your mind. Never has been, since before you could talk."

"You know you can - when you need to." She laughed. "I'll talk with Gabrielle. Give my love to Mom."

We said we loved one another, then goodnight.

I walked to Gabrielle's office and told her. She embraced me. I said it was sad - but it'd been a matter of time. I said I was going to go walking for a while.

I put on my overcoat, walked out the door and shut it, walked down the marble steps, out the iron gate, turned left down 28th, walked to the curving streets.

The sunset light was entirely gone from the sky, and the night was clear.

I drew up to the parapet, leaned forward, elbow on the black rail.

Stars were burning over the waters of the Bay, and dimmer broader lights moved over the waters on the great ships that passed in and out of the great open. The ships sounded deep tones now and then from their high bridges, sometimes overlap, other times singly, and wholly separate were higher, faster buoy signals down at water level. There was one out by the rocks that rolled with the waves and sounded a bell, invisible in the night but carrying for miles.

Sometimes, the three signals sounded at once for a moment.

I looked at the ships flowing steadily, and for a moment my old desire to run held sway. I thought of going on board any one of them and making a life, free of old failures and troubles.

But as I looked, I realized the world still moved, that parts of me had been hurt, hurt badly, but much of me was well, and shortly I would be freer than I had ever been. There was much that I could build on, that I could make my own. It'd be hard work, harder by far than the job I was

to leave in a few days, but it would be mine, the work that only I could do: my life's work.

I could say no to none of it: not the best, or the worst, or the most seeming-ordinary. I could not run.

The ocean breeze rose and swept up to the parapet and touched my face. I found myself beginning to smile, looking at the ships passing at some magical time of balanced tides. The world had wonder in it, and it still moved, and I could move with it.

I turned round, as if seeing this place for the first time.

Here were the houses of men - the same, really, as the simple ones of Hampton Beach. All of them, visibly or invisibly, had widow's walks. For in all of those houses was love and loss.

Each of us has a traveler we hope, one day, shall return from the sea. And so we wait, by the waves.

I thought of the people in those houses - all had love in them - and all had known the breaking of their hearts.

I felt rise in me the knowledge that the love just gone had been real, important, and true. It was in its purity and freedom what I'd longed for, written of, caught brief glimpses of in best-moments.

I turned back to the waters again.

It was something that had to be understood. I thought of the loves in my life come and gone, and as I looked out I spoke to the world of sky and water and stone and star: I promised, within me, that I would understand.

I turned, and saw the houses of men, some dark and asleep, others lit from within, warmly, and I thought: for you, too. I will find that which is not seen or heard.

And I thought at last of my parents. My father had run away into the world - my mother had hidden in herself. Neither had lingered at the delicate balance where they might be met, and touched, by another soul, even in beautiful passing.

As Mira had touched me, and I had touched her.

I would build on what I had lived.

I looked at the ocean, one last time, smiling. And then I turned and began to walk.

As I passed out of the place called Seacliff, I saw that fog-clouds were beginning to pass through the perfect night sky, flying in above the houses and beginning to descend.

I'd stepped down, and was walking across Clement.

I looked to my left.

The city lights were far off, but clear as ever.

I looked forward.

The clouds might lower.

I might have to walk in gloom.

But at the end, I would be home.

THE END

This book has been set in 12-pt LTC Metropolitan - a 2000 digitization by Gerald Giampa of the celebrated font Centaur drawn by Bruce Rogers in 1914.

Centaur was in turn a revival and interpretation of the earliest Venetian fonts - Nicolas Jenson's Roman of 1475 & Francesco Griffo's types of 1495.

For his font's 1929 release on the Monotype system, Rogers chose as italic Frederic Ward's 1925 font Arrighi, which had been inspired by Ludovico degli Arrighi's famed chancery cursive of 1520.

The lining figures are from LTC Metropolitan Pro & the fleuron is from LTC Vine Leaves. The paper is 55-lb natural at 364ppi, balanced to neutral acidity for permanence.

The page block is 6"x9" - text block is 4"x6" - normal indent is 0.1667" - lead is 12.4 pts - margins derive from Tschichold's elaboration of van de Graaf's canon and are figured on the division into elevenths.

Book design has, in recent years, at times departed from classical strictures against typographical orphans. Given the nature of this text, the decision was made to hold rigidly to pageblock geometry and permit widows & orphans freely.